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METAL HAMMER

THE ANNUAL 2024

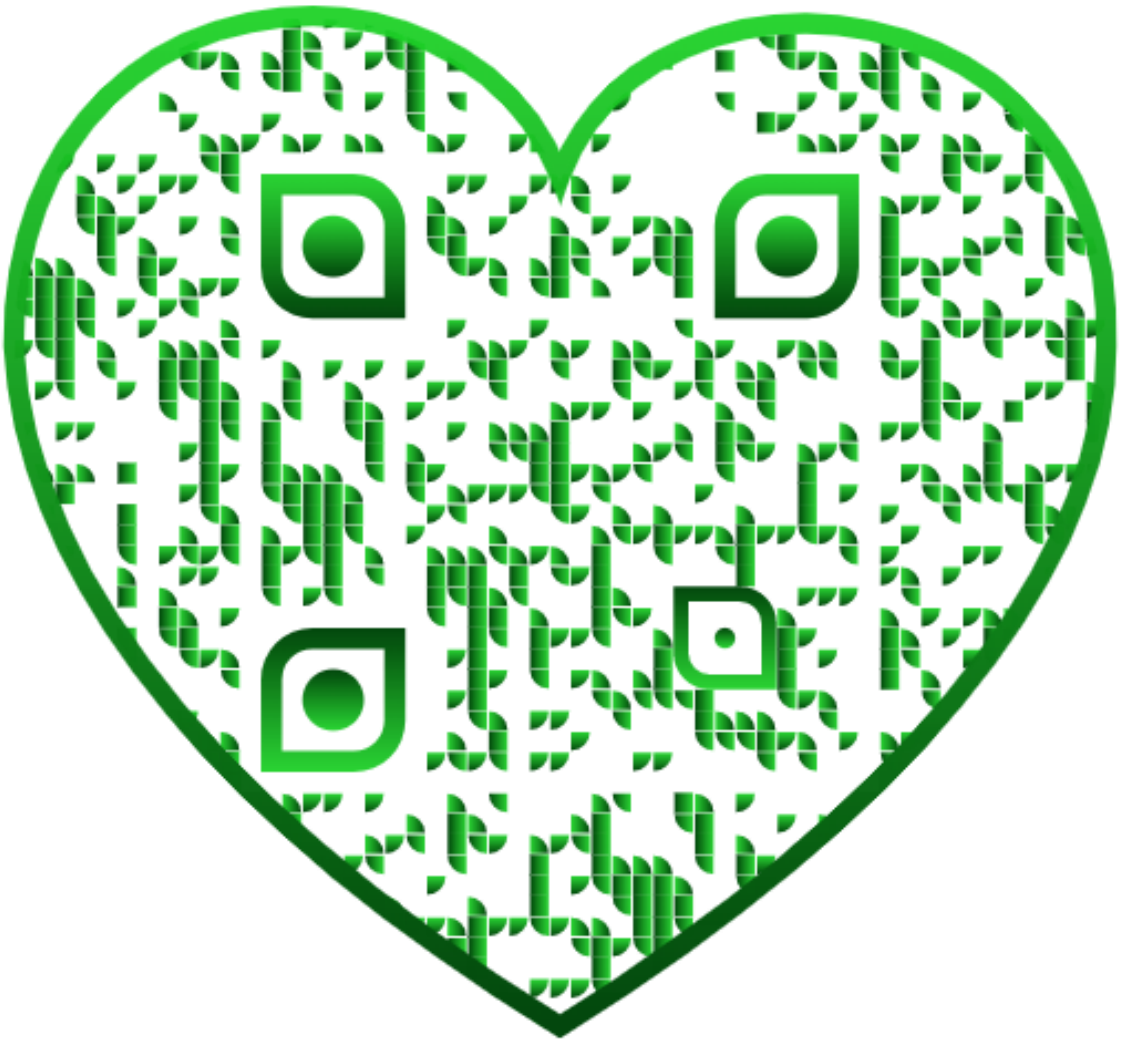
FEATURING

IRON MAIDEN, WITHIN TEMPTATION, **KORN,** EVANESCENCE, **METALLICA,** BABYMETAL, **SYSTEM OF A DOWN,** LINKIN PARK, **SLAYER,** AVENGED SEVENFOLD, **SKINDRED,** SABATON, **& MORE**

Digital Edition

FUTURE

VOLUME 6



FUTURE

WHERE ON EARTH DOES THE TIME GO?

EVERY TIME IT comes to putting one of these annuals together, it offers an opportunity to decompress and reflect on the year that was. After a strange couple of years courtesy of the pandemic, in many ways the last twelve months have felt as close as we've had to a proper run of normality since early 2020. As close to normality as we can manage, that is, given the still completely insane state of affairs that is Planet Earth right now.

Thank Satan, then, for heavy metal. Whatever the hell is going on out there, you can rest assured that there remains an endless supply of heavy, exciting and totally kickass bands putting out top-tier albums and playing life-affirming shows. Want evidence of that? Cast your eyes over the following 146 pages, which give you the ultimate highlight reel of the last twelve months of the world's very greatest music magazine.

From getting backstage and front row access to some of heavy metal's most legendary names like Iron Maiden and Metallica, to presenting you exciting, discourse-challenging young names rising up in the metal scene like Voice Of Baceprot and Scene Queen, to celebrating metal's vast history through looks back at classic albums by the likes of System Of A Down and Linkin Park, it's all here. 2023 has seen Avenged Sevenfold release one of heavy music's most challenging records in decades, heralded new eras for Babymetal, Skindred and Within Temptation and even saw a German power metal band take on Eurovision.

It's been a pleasure getting to read all the amazing interviews and features put together by Metal Hammer Editor Eleanor and the team, and I couldn't be more honoured to be reliving with you them courtesy of this special collection.

However the rest of your year may pan out from here, may it be safe, joyous and full of metal for you. Everyone involved in *Metal Hammer* appreciates your support hugely, and we hope you enjoy reading this annual as much as we enjoyed putting it together.

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AMY LEE & JONATHAN DAVIS

FREAKS UNLEASHED

Two legendary bands. Two icons that defined a generation of misfits. Here's what happened when we united Evanescence's Amy Lee and Korn's Jonathan Davis to talk fame, friendship, and facing your demons

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL • PICTURES: ALICIA HAUFF

AMY LEE & JONATHAN DAVIS

AMY LEE & JONATHAN DAVIS

JD and Amy's *Freak On A Leash* duet went down a storm on their tour together

On the surface, Jonathan Davis and Amy Lee don't appear to have much in common. While Korn's vocalist is best known for purging his psyche and utilising pure rage to fuel his art, Evanescence bandleader Amy is a classically trained multi-instrumentalist. To an outsider, the primal roar of Korn and the vast, intricately crafted swell of Evanescence could seem worlds apart.

In reality, the two share many similarities. Both have endured childhood trauma, which colours the music they make, giving Korn and Evanescence an honesty that connects with their fans on a massive scale. Both the bands they front have survived well beyond the nu metal tag of their early years, and are now thought of as unique artists in their own right – latest albums *Requiem* and *The Bitter Truth* charted in the Top 10 in the UK and the Top 20 in the US. Both have experimented beyond the boundaries of those bands, entering into film scoring and classical work. And, as we find out when we join a Zoom call with the pair in the aftermath of their recent co-headlining tour across the US – where they teamed up to perform *Freak On A Leash* together each night – both have an immense amount of respect and affection for each other.

We've been granted a rare opportunity to converse with two giants of the metal world. But, as Jonathan sits with his brand-new puppy on his lap – a subject that dominates the first few minutes of our conversation, and leads to Amy telling us that she's in the process of getting a kitten – today feels far more like an informal catch-up than a rock star state of address.

Can you remember the first time you heard each other's music?

Amy: "Gosh! I'm not sure what the first song was, but it was in high school for me!"

Jonathan: "You're already making me feel old!"

Amy: "It was like nothing that I had ever heard. We all have certain artists in our life that we hear and they have a spark, they have an impact. Korn was absolutely one of those artists for me. The music was coming from a real place. So, I became a fan right away. My favourite album was [2002's] *Untouchables*."

Jonathan: "That's so surreal for me. I still trip out on it. You have to remember that I was this green kid from Bakersfield, but we relocated to Huntington Beach. I gave up my whole life to live my dream, and I can't believe that this thing we did could be so impactful. We were just doing our own thing, these punk kids telling everyone to fuck off – and we've gone through our entire career like that! Even the name! Who names their band Korn, man?! And to hear Amy say she first heard us in high school and… now look at what she is doing!"

Amy: "That's what metal is, that's what rock is supposed to be, that nonconformist attitude. 'This is what this is supposed to look like? Well, I'm not gonna do that!' The whole idea is that you are meant to break the mould."

Jonathan: "I remember driving around in my car and their song [*Bring Me To Life*] came on, and I flipped, I thought it was cool. Listen… I hate everything, man, but I loved her voice. I liked that there was a girl doing some rock music and it was badass."

You both had to shake off the tag of nu metal around that time as well…

Amy: "I have a feeling Jonathan may feel the same, but I don't like boxes. As artists we are unique. The real value in something is being who you are and not trying to fit into a certain genre. I want the freedom to make whatever music comes out of my soul. When [2003 debut album] *Fallen* came out, I was fresh out of school and I was like a cartoon of myself; it felt like nobody got me, it was just a 2-D representation of me based on people only knowing a couple of songs. I really struggled with that."

Jonathan: "For me, we were making *Untouchables*, and that was when so many bands were coming out and jumping on the bandwagon. Now I don't mind the tag 'nu metal' – they named an entire subgenre after my band? Holy shit! That's cool! – but punk-ass, crazy Korn back then, we were like, 'What the fuck? Fuck everyone! We're going to make this insane record.' Keep people guessing. It had become a parody of itself – I don't want to be defined like that! Nowadays, I don't care, but back then, I hated it. I make the music I make… you don't call Metallica some thrash band! They're fucking Metallica! You don't call the Chili Peppers a funk rock band! They're the fucking Chili Peppers! And Korn are Korn!"

Amy: "Exactly! You did it, there is only one Korn!"

"I FOUND MYSELF RELATING TO BILLIE EILISH"

AMY LEE

Both of you seem to really dig deep into your personal lives and experiences to make music.

Amy: "That's what sticks, that's what stays, that's what really touches people. Not the bullshit. It's when you're really taking a chance and speaking from the heart. I want to feel something real when I listen to music – it's food for the soul, to feel not alone in the universe. When it comes to the bands that really stick, they're the ones that really put everything out there."

Jonathan: "For sure. Kids have bullshit detectors; they can hear that shit a mile away."

Amy: "We had to fight the power with labels and stuff ▶

LIVE: STEVE THRASHER

Amy invites you
into her world

Korny pals: Munky and Amy hanging backstage

throughout my career. It's always been a fight. Not now, I fought my fights…"

Jonathan: "And you won!"

Amy: "I did! The fights were always for the fans' intelligence. They are not as stupid as the industry thinks they are! We're going to give them something real, and it can't be fake… anything but that! That turned into fights about real strings versus synthesisers. I knew we had to spend the money to make it sound right, because I knew it was what I would have wanted as a fan."

Jonathan: "I feel the same. We were lucky, because we always told them that it was going to be our way or no way. We got into fights with magazines, fights with video directors, literal physical altercations, because we were so sure that it wasn't going to go down like that."

Amy: "*'Y'all want a single, say fuck that!'*"

Jonathan: "Exactly!"

Amy: "When [Korn's] *Y'all Want A Single* came out [in 2003], it really affected me again. I was like, 'These people get me! This is my people!'"

Jonathan: "When the managers said, 'We gotta try and get a single,' we were like, 'OK, here's your single!'"

Amy: "[To *Hammer*] They play that song every night, usually near the end before the encore, and we are all always side of the stage like, 'Oh boy! Here we go!' It's always one of our favourite songs to warm up to before we go on, too."

Is it hard for both of you to get into a place where you have to deliver such personal material every night?

Jonathan: "It's like a switch flicks in my mind and I go to that place. Honestly, I kind of enjoy it. Most of the time I'm happy as fuck, but when I hear my band, and there's a crowd, and it's loud as fuck, I go there. I feed that to the people that want it, and they purge it and they let it out and it's a huge release. I need it to get whatever is inside of me out, but by the end of the tour I'm so exhausted I can barely walk. I'm in hell, I want to go home and sleep for two weeks. But I need it, it's therapy."

Amy: "It's a release, and there are days when you don't feel like going onstage. But, without fail, when you get to the point where you walk up onto that stage and something takes over, it's purifying."

Jonathan: "Totally. I've said, 'I'm gonna go on autopilot!' so many times and…"

Amy: "Never gonna happen!"

"KORN WERE LIKE KIDS, LETTING OFF FIREWORKS"

AMY LEE

Jonathan, how difficult was it to do *Daddy* live for the first time in 2015, for the 20th anniversary of your self-titled debut?
Jonathan: "I felt like I robbed the world of doing that live for so long. I felt like I owed it to our fans that were hardcore enough to come and see us on the 20th anniversary of that album, but I don't wanna do it again. Going out and touring that record, I realised how dark it is – it's some depressing shit. As we got into *Follow The Leader*, it became more about groove. The emotion was there, but it wasn't that particular darkness we captured on that first record. In a few years, it's the 30th anniversary and… I don't think I wanna go through that again. It was difficult, and I think I was proving to myself that I could do it too."

You both had to deal with an intense level of fame early on in your careers. How was that?
Jonathan: "I became a raging alcoholic. You can't go anywhere, you can't do anything, you have to have a fucking bodyguard 24 hours a day. Crazy shit. Still to this day, it's tough, but that's what we signed up for. Everyone in Korn went a bit nuts in the late 90s."
Amy: "It was a hard adjustment. I was 21 [when *Bring Me To Life* came out], and I was often the only female anywhere. In my mind I thought, 'That doesn't matter!', but you do start to feel alone. It wasn't just about being female. Like I was talking about – it was that you start seeing the cartoon of yourself, the album cover version, the interview version. How can you feel like everyone knows me… but nobody knows me…? We've grown up and times have changed, but in the beginning it was scary. I used a lot of that as inspiration for the second album [*The Open Door*, released in 2006]. Billie Eilish's second album does that too, and I found myself really relating to a lot of that."
Jonathan: "It was hard for my little boy, Nathan. People would rush me and he would start crying, because all he knew was that 'This is my daddy and this is my daddy time.' He would cry and I'd have to say to this person, 'Yo, I'm with my kid.' And they go away pissed off. It's mentally taxing. I know Amy can relate, but most people can't."
Amy: "Yeah, you're ungrateful!"
Jonathan: "'You're an ungrateful fuck, fuck you! I'm burning your CDs!' That sort of shit."

Do you remember meeting each other for the first time?
Amy: "I do. It was at a festival, I guess. I was too nervous to knock on the door. So, I wrote a note saying how big a deal it was to have played with them, pushed it under the door and was happy to leave it at that. But they chased me down. Their security guy came and got me and brought me in. You were really nice to me, Jonathan, you were like, 'Hey come on in, sit down!' It was really sweet. Do you remember that now?"
Jonathan: "Yeah, I do now. I haven't thought about that for years!"
Amy: "Fast-forward a few years and we're doing Family Values [in 2007], and they really taught me how to have fun on tour. There was one night where I was stood by our bus, and suddenly these golf carts came out of nowhere, and all of Korn are on them and they say, 'Hey! We're gonna go let off some fireworks!' It was just like they were still kids. There was something really pure about that."

Amy was not impressed by Jonathan's 'knock knock' joke repertoire

LIVE: STEVE THRASHER

Jonathan: "That's the whole reason we become artists, so that we can remain kids. Not to conform to what society tells us we have to be. I'm a 51-year-old kid. I remember that tour now. It was us and you, Trivium…"
Amy: "I remember Atreyu was on that tour and… Flyleaf, and Hellyeah."

With Atreyu and Trivium on that Family Values tour, did it feel like there was something of a sea change happening in heavy music?
Amy: "Music has changed all along the way, and I think that is a good thing. That's what keeps it interesting and genuine."
Jonathan: "I just like anyone that is nice to me!"
Amy: "Ha ha ha! I had such a great time with you guys on this last tour! Coming back after doing that Family Values tour, what, 15 years later, it actually means more. After the pandemic, the passion from the audience to the bands and the crew, it was a moment of coming full circle. You get older and you recognise that time is fleeting, and we're very lucky to have that moment and to have each other."

What did you think of Amy's cover of Korn song *Thoughtless* in 2004, Jonathan?
Jonathan: "I LOVED it! I loved how you broke it down and really got the chord progression and the melody; I wrote that fucking thing on an acoustic guitar in my room in Arizona, when we moved to go and write [for *Untouchables*]. I locked myself in my room and I would just write all night. I came up with that riff, I played the drums on the demo, I laid it all down, and I just love that she made it so… beautiful. Then when you put it out [on 2004 live album *Anywhere But Home*], they didn't put the [Parental Advisory] sticker on it…"
Amy: "Oh yeah! They ripped it out of Walmart! Ha ha ha!"
Jonathan: "All because some uptight Christian family were pissed at the language on there!"
Amy: "It didn't have the parental sticker and they said, 'What? I thought Evanescence was a Christian band?'"
Jonathan: "Exactly, all that shit. I was going, 'Yes!' I love that."
Amy: "It's one of my favourite songs. I think the thing with metal is, it still needs to have a melody for me, and something I love about Korn is their beautiful melodies. When we started this tour I said, 'We gotta do some collab! You can pretty much pick any song!' I was really inspired by Tori Amos. She's done a million covers, and she showed me that you can take pretty much any song and give it a whole new perspective and make you hear the lyrics in a different way. She did this cover of *Smells Like Teen Spirit*, and she gave it this deep pain. And Korn have done so many cool covers over the years…"

Obviously, you did *Freak On A Leash* on the Korn *MTV Unplugged* set too, Amy. It aired in 2007. How did that come about?
Jonathan: "I do not remember…"
Amy: "You guys just asked me! I was like, 'Hell yeah, I'm gonna do a Korn song!'"
Jonathan: "You know what's funny about that? Originally, we were going to do a mash-up with Metallica as the last song, but they were in the studio and couldn't leave. My second choice was The Cure [who performed *Make Me Bad / In Between Days*]."
Amy: "I remember Robert Smith was there!"
Jonathan: "They all were! And that freaked me out, because that's my band right there. But we knew we wanted to have guests, and so we asked Amy, because of the *Thoughtless* cover, and we wanted people to hear *Freak On A Leash* stripped right down. It was so intimate, we wanted

"It has pockets!"

Great friends, sharing the love onstage

to have people hear the actual melodies. We didn't really rehearse, remember?"

Amy: "I feel like we ran through it once or twice, but I'm a practiser – I had run through it a whole bunch of times at home."

Jonathan: "Well, I appreciate that… because I'm not! Ha ha ha! I just gotta feel it!"

And not many people would have believed that metal could translate to an acoustic style in that way, either…

Jonathan: "Nobody believed we could pull it off! It was the most intricate thing we had ever done. We had all these extra musicians, strings, a glockenspiel player, the glass harmonica player. 'Korn can't do *Unplugged*!' 'Yeah? We fucking can, watch this!' We had to look at what Korn is really about, it's about me purging my demons, but we did exactly what we wanted, and we wanted to come out of leftfield. A lot of people hated it but we really didn't care!"

Amy: "Anything great that comes out of nowhere is always going to get people going, 'Nah! Hated it!' But to bring everything full circle, for me to get to do that every night on stage [on our recent tour], to do the heavy version, was such an honour. I've always wanted to do that."

Jonathan: "It was great, too. Everyone loved it every night."

Amy: "It felt like the ultimate celebration every night, right at the end of the encore after a night of so much love. I'm going to miss doing that."

"I GAVE UP MY WHOLE LIFE TO LIVE MY DREAM"

JONATHAN DAVIS

LIVE: STEVE THRASHER

At this point, our time is up, and Amy and Jonathan quickly make plans to speak again soon. It's been a trip learning about their journeys and how they've connected over the years, and before we go, we ask both icons what they most admire about each other.

"I respect the shit out of how she can sit down in front of a piano and make such beautiful music," Jonathan immediately replies. "I respect her as a musician and a person totally."

Amy beams, before answering, "It's interesting… he was a legend before, and now we're friends. That's a weird way to start. It's amazing to me. He's a rad, down-to-earth, normal person with an amazing talent. It's that simple."

And with that, these two friends, so different on the face of it but so similar at their core, bid us farewell.

EVANESCENCE'S *THE BITTER TRUTH* IS OUT VIA SONY MUSIC GMBH. KORN'S *REQUIEM* IS OUT VIA LOMA VISTA. FOR FURTHER UPDATES ON BOTH BANDS, HEAD TO WWW.METALHAMMER.COM

VILLE VALO

AFTER LIFE

Following the dissolution of his lifelong band Him, Ville Valo faced an identity crisis. In January, we found out how he became reborn for a new era

SONNETS: ALEXANDER MILAS • ILLUMINATIONS: JOHN MCMURTRIE

VILLE VALO

VILLE VALO

It's a gloomy November evening in London and inside the crystalline bowels of the Universal Music tower there are dark goings-on under a winter moon. An arcane gathering of power brokers, decision makers and tastemakers has convened to hear the first, dulcet tones of a new record in its entirety – a lyrical and melodious exsanguination called *Neon Noir*. Less an album, the subject of tonight's attention is more like a swan song played in reverse or a departed loved one's voice heard in the wind. We'll get to that.

There are no robes here, such vestigial ornaments long since done away with to provide anonymity on public transportation, but the importance of these proceedings is in no way diminished. This is how the music industry in all its mysterious dealings determines where and when its various powers are to be invoked – an Illuminati-like network of aligned hands is this rogues' gallery of journalists, label managers and festival promoters. Even the helmswoman of the gazette you hold in your very hands can be seen lurking in the shadows.

At the centre of the dim chamber stands a lone, flat-capped figure, his chiselled visage peculiarly, vampirically unchanged by the many years since he first graced the cover of an international publication such as this, and let it be said that he was never a stranger to these folios.

If anything can be said of Ville Valo's appearance it's that he could teach anyone half his age a thing or two about self-presentation – and, for the record, they'd be 23 at time of publication. Svelte, casually besuited and elegantly understated in his attire – all different hues of black, obviously – he's been affably chatting with the gathered conclave with such fluidity and confidence that anyone would think it's something he does every day, and anyone who knows his incongruous penchant for reclusiveness when off the stage would suspect that maybe he's changed since we saw him last.

For the record, he does not, and he has not. Ten long years have passed since His Infernal Majesty's final release, the career summation that was 2013's *Tears On Tape*, and it has been five years since Him played their final note on the second of two sold-out nights at the London Roundhouse in December of 2017. Their concluding song was the aptly chosen, syrupy dirge of *When Love And Death Embrace*, and the mortuary pallor of its refrains couldn't have been better matched to the forlorn mood of that distinctly funereal moment.

For many, it was a farewell to one of life's few constants: Him were less like a band and more like a comforting gothic world to those who fell prey to its blackened enchantments, and as if further affirmation is needed, no one in the field of music has since emerged to even remotely fill the heartagram-shaped hole left in Ville's wake. As the lights in the venue went up to reveal no shortage of streaked mascara, it would have been impossible to surmise whether we'd ever hear from Ville again – such was the finality of that tour and the deathly vibe of that night.

More desolate still was the long silence that ensued after the 26-year adventure he spearheaded under an iconic banner designed by his own hand. Eight records, ten million sales and countless fans getting heartagram tattoos of variable quality were the tallies of Ville's musical ledger. It was over. Him was dead. Their founder was gone. And then, quietly, headless blooms began to flank his headstone.

First came the news that he was blowing off the cobwebs to undertake a tour of Finland to record and perform songs by the late, beloved Finnish singer-songwriter Rauli 'Badding' Somerjoki, with Somerjoki's old band, Agents. The project smashed the charts in Finland before they eventually disbanded.

More silence followed until March 2020, when an unheralded EP was released under a new banner, VV, complete with an updated reimagining of the famed heartagram. A portent of what was to come, *Gothica Fennica Vol. 1* was far from alien to anyone familiar with Him's long-established sound, but it also bore the hallmarks of a songwriter unbound by the restraints of collaboration or co-writing. As the world smouldered, it was a hopeful omen that perhaps not everything had been lost to the pandemic.

We retreat from the listening session to a quieter room to shine to shine a neon light on the story of the rebirth and toil that followed, a res-erection-

Ville shoots a look as if to say, 'You're not gonna write that, are you?' Well…

"I FELT LIKE AN OUTCAST. I DIDN'T UNDERSTAND MYSELF"

"Promo tours are like Bullet-point for my Valentine."

Ville has sunk into his armchair, a body deflated. We've just been talking about the sometimes less-than-rock'n'roll demands of album promotion, and how while just 10 years have passed since Him's final release, a lifetime of change in the industry's inner workings has followed. It's Thursday and Ville's already done the rounds in Berlin this week, plus a big photo session, too – rumour has it that a smoke machine for a cover shoot triggered a confrontation with security here yesterday. Whoever the photographer was that bolted the door shut so the shoot could continue remains a mystery at the time of going to press.

But despite Ville's tiredness after two days of media-based pokes and prods and his first international flight in five years, he's still exhibiting a remarkably playful way with words: the product of voracious reading and self-confessed Anglophilia that can make it easy to forget this is his second language, although as we'll soon discover there are some words that resist translation.

We're reflecting on how many times he's appeared in the pages of *Metal Hammer*. I produce a photo from many years gone by, taken by Mick Hutson. It's Ville, looking like a goth deer caught in headlights, sitting in the back of a limo between the late Dimebag Darrell and Mötley Crüe's Nikki Sixx on his way to the *Metal Hammer* Golden God awards. He smirks.

"It was a playground, wasn't it?" he says of the Ville of yore. "Oh my god, that was a weird one. I remember Dimebag – he'd been up all night, and there's me stuck in the middle. I gave my Golden God award to Zakk Wylde's daughter. He told me she was a huge fan and I'd had a sip too many, so…"

And let it be said that by the time Him went stratospheric – a runway stretching between 2000's *Razorblade Romance* and 2003's definitive *Love Metal* – there were few publications

VILLE VALO

Post-Him and post-pandemic, Ville Valo has reinvented his work

VILLE VALO

This musical pair of
bell-bottoms goes
well with a cap

that weren't peppering their pages with images of Ville. Photogenic but, more importantly, hilarious, his wry and dismissive self-regard tempered the styled polish of his many covershoots. In a time when emo was king, Ville brought something current but gleefully out of step with fashion, musical and otherwise, but he persevered because, arguably, beyond the music he possessed that rare quality that escapes so many whose trade is on the road and in music studios. He was interesting, and Him and their legion of fans were their own movement. For a time, if you ever stood at the back of one of their sold-out shows, it looked something like Beatlemania directed by Tim Burton.

What would you say to yourself back then? He smiles and takes a moment before replying.

"It isn't a horror movie thing, but my oldest self has whispered to my younger self many times. You know, I could have done stuff way wiser in the sense of trying to become more successful in terms of money, listening to record companies or whatnot, because people had a damn hard time trying to figure out what we were all about. I wouldn't do anything differently because then I wouldn't be here – that's the beauty of it."

And, tracing the course of what Ville did, what he's doing now, there's little to suggest that anything has changed in terms of his resistance to the common methods of self-promotion. In a time of compulsive micro-blogging and algorithm-feeding content, the official 'Heartagram' Instagram account posts at roughly the same rate as the Vatican. Be it about the preservation of mystery or a refusal to play the game, let it never be said that he didn't do it his way.

"I'm a slow learner. I only learned about the eggplant emoji yesterday! But as for those whispers, it's something to do with the nonlinearity of time," he continues. "I had some foresight to the pandemic, though, and found myself a house with a photography studio which I turned into a music studio. It's one big room that enabled me to spread around all the weird pieces of kit from all eras – sort of my creative central. During the pandemic, that's all I did. There was no rhyme or reason, I just thought it was time to move on and do something different. It could have been my older self whispering to my younger self in the middle of the night, like, 'Now's a good time. You'll understand it better in a few years.' So yeah, it could be one of those things."

"I ONLY LEARNED ABOUT THE EGGPLANT EMOJI YESTERDAY!"

We notice a white wall in the corridor is covered in dozens of Sharpie signatures from fellow artists who've passed through. Some are small, while pop groups Bastille and Westlife have gone big with huge cubital letters. Unimpressed, Ville reaches for a glow-in-the-dark VV sticker from his breast pocket and wryly sticks it up at the top. Always a rebel.

Was it hard to decide which direction to go in after Him?

"Musically, I'm a pair of bell-bottoms," he says. "If you want to follow hits, you're always going to be too late. Music and art is essential for my wellbeing, it's the air that I breathe – it's natural for me, but at times I've felt like a human among the lizard people, an infiltrator from another galaxy. The only thing I can do is the thing I can do."

Of course, it raises the question of how VV and indeed *Neon Noir* came about. That Ville has always presided over every detail of his music is no secret – there's never been a doubt as to whose vision it all was, and the ending of Him is just as important as the beginning we're here to discuss.

As anyone who's seen the end of a relationship will know, the signs of impending demise can appear long before the cracks emerge, and the conclusion of Him was no different. To paraphrase a singer named BB on the prologue to VV, the thrill was gone…

"Expiration is funny when it comes to bands," he says matter-of-factly. Whatever wounds may have been inflicted, they have long since closed, and he's at ease when prompted on what went down.

"It didn't happen overnight – we'd started having trouble after *Tears On Tape*. Gas [Lipstick] had left the band and we found a new drummer, which was fantastic for a time, but we just couldn't find it in ourselves – a new album. We started working on ideas, but they didn't sound very good. The adult way to approach things is that if it's something you really do love, you have to love them enough to let them go when the right moment comes. The spark was no longer there, so timing-wise, it was good – I wouldn't have minded it to happen a little earlier because now I see the end of my own career in the distance. I never wanted it to feel like a job. You'll see bands touring where it quite clearly is. Something so central needs to be full of passion and laughter and joy and tears – dramatic, like a pint of milk."

Dairy funny. Have you been in touch with the guys since then, we ask?

"I haven't been in touch with Gas in more than 10 years," comes the reply. "And Linde [Mikko 'Linde' Lindström, guitarist] is quite a solitary fellow who's not a big talker anyway. But Mige [Mikko 'Mige' Paananen, bassist] was a bit of a Rick Rubin on the album. He was like this weird guru that came by every three months and gave me a stamp of approval, like, 'Yeah, this is fine.' He's one of my earliest childhood friends and one of my best mates still, so we keep in touch – that's rare. It's been 35 years or something…"

It was that relationship that provided something of the lifeline that Ville needed. He describes the feeling after Him's final show as something akin to phantom limb syndrome, where amputees report sensation in appendages that are no longer there.

"I felt like an outsider, an outcast," he says. "[I felt like] I didn't understand myself, and that the world doesn't understand me or that I didn't belong. It's a profound feeling, you know, to existentially feel that you don't understand the world or your place in it. Funnily enough, how I got through that was writing. The pandemic really painted everyone into a corner. I wasn't suicidal, but there was a tinge of depression as well, not seeing tomorrow or the worth of the day after tomorrow. People reacted in different ways. I forced myself back to music, and music gave me the gift of song once again. I was able to pull off a couple of Sabbath rip-offs, so that made me feel better. That was a big deal."

Ville will go on to animatedly recount how the loss of purpose and trajectory coupled with the worldwide shutdown was in some sense the perfect reset post-Him, and while he hit a very low ebb, it was precisely the kind of downtime he needed and hadn't had since Him's formation when he was just a teen.

"There was no scheduling, nobody to communicate with about what I was working on, so it was very unfiltered intuition, straight to tape or whatever recording medium, and I found myself having goosebumps like I'd never had before. Well…" his eyes impishly go to the ceiling, "musically, at least. I'm scared of stuff being really repetitive – it's nice to enjoy a binge watch on Netflix, but you're never gonna get the time back. That doesn't mean, 'Don't do it!' But enjoy ▶

the *now*, take advantage of the time. That's what we'll be doing when we go on tour with the band next year, challenging myself to do lots of things and not step into a sort of zombified existence. People are so distracted…"

At the beginning of the *Divine Comedy*, the main character – Dante Alighieri's Pilgrim – wrote of finding himself in a dark wood halfway through the walk of life; the straight path, lost. It was a roundabout way of describing the confusion that can come with middle age, but in his mid-40s and with the deep shadows and brilliant highlights of an illustrious career in the rear-view mirror, I wonder aloud if the same could be said of the current predicament.

Dante's come up because, as is often the case with Ville, the subjects of language and literature are never far away. I ask him to elaborate on that tinge of depression he's mentioned, and he says one thing and lets it hang in the air: "Kaiho."

Sorry?

"Kai-ho," he says again, slowly. It's a Finnish word, he explains, that defies direct translation but describes the twist of emotions he was detangling in the wake of a lifetime on the road and in the limelight. "It isn't a negative feeling. It's a bittersweet reverie. I think Finnish people find it profoundly positive as well, because it also means that you have lived, you have loved and that you experience things that actually make a difference, at least to you personally, hopefully, for the people around you."

Did you struggle?

"I had a month where I didn't get out of bed," he states. "Around that long, at least. I was pretty worried about it. I forced myself up and back to music through conversations with mates, you know, getting my spirits up a bit, but it was a weird feeling. It's not like you *can't* get up. You just don't *want* to get up. You don't want to do anything and you can't really do anything: just super-tired, some form of post-traumatic stress after all the years. It could be that it took a while for it to hit, and it coincided with a pandemic. I wasn't able to do anything, so my body and my mind told me to get the sleep I missed back in the day. Thankfully I slept it off, but life doesn't get any easier. It's getting more complicated, more bittersweet – a tough combo. A pint half full, half empty…"

Of course, the wrought-iron melody of *Neon Noir*'s various paeans to love and loss wouldn't seem correct if they came from a place of emotional buoyancy, but if the slump Ville describes really was just making up for lost sleep-time, he's making no bones about his desire to get back to work.

"I'm not thinking about the end, but what I do realise is that, thinking in logical terms, it's going to be really weird if I'm 60 and still in it, which means that I have less than that in terms of album cycles. It starts to get a bit scary because I've done music all my life, but then again, thinking like that makes me smile."

So how does a 46-year-old's vision of love change from, say, a 20-year-old's?

"Well, maybe we haven't had that 'one true love' in the traditional sense in Shakespearean drama: the overwhelming one that takes over everything. You can't compare relationships and you shouldn't – different times, different people, different chemistry, different reasons. Music is still at its best when it's a soundtrack to important events."

"I DIDN'T GET OUT OF BED FOR A MONTH"

So how does *Neon Noir* reflect your own life?

"It's very sincere – it encapsulates things. The indecisiveness on whether I belong to the camp of Black Sabbath or Depeche Mode, the constant struggle with good and evil. *Run Away From The Sun* is the first song I wrote and I didn't know if I had a song in me at all, but I had to start from somewhere. I had all these ideas. I started to do it and follow my intuition. I wasn't in a rush, I had no deadlines – I didn't even know if I was going to continue, and that was the most fruitful ground, because it felt real and unadulterated by pressure…"

As new as it all is for Ville, there are some things that have remained unchanged, or perhaps present is a better word. The heartagram was, after all, the gothic bat-signal of the early 00s onward…

"It was everything Him stood for," he says. "I just wiggled that one line and realised it has my initials, and that was the reason I called the project VV, and I liked that it had a 'V for Victory' kinda vibe to it, and visually it had the traditional aspect to it, a current iteration of the same idea. It's symbolic, because I didn't want to force myself to take a completely different route musically. I'm not an actor, and Him all happened very organically. I was finding my voice, or whatever you want to call it, through Type O and Black Sabbath back then, and I still am."

From the mood in the room it's a welcome return indeed. It seems that for the first time in a lifetime he's found his path – with the help of a little neon to hold back the darkness.

***NEON NOIR* IS OUT ON NOW 13 VIA UMG/ SPINEFARM. FOR FURTHER UPDATES ON VILLE VALO, STAY TUNED TO WWW.METALHAMMER.**

LIGHTS OUT

Ville Valo reveals the dark secrets behind *Neon Noir*

01 ECHOLOCATE YOUR LOVE

"I was enjoying a documentary on the navigational skills of bats and imagined their nocturnal courting calls bouncing eerily between the walls of the abyss in a gothic ping pong-fashion. To make sure I was communicating this musical vision clearly, I included a cowbell in the middle eight, just because whenever one can, one should."

02 RUN AWAY FROM THE SUN

"The light at the end of the tunnel can sometimes shine so bright it's scary, and my running-away skills have been highly developed over the years by sweeping most of my issues under the carpet. There are also a few church bell samples ringing among all the 80s-inspired synth sequences, only to make sure the ever-fickle balance between good and evil doesn't err on the side of Skywalker."

03 NEON NOIR

"A cheerful memento mori if there ever was one, and my first guitar solo on record. The working title was 'Vangelis Halen' and I think I managed to get fairly close in marrying the claustrophobic beauty of *Blade Runner* with the reckless abandon of VH, in a sort of funeral-car-crash-in-slow-motion-type setting."

04 LOVELETTING

"An ode to the setting sun and a tale of dancing on the razor's edge between holding on and letting go. A moribundle of joy in a patchouli garden, with handclaps."

05 THE FOREVERLOST

"The Finnish tourism board should definitely include 'Nyctophile Shangri-La' as a tagline

Ville: cloak and swagger

promoting Finland from now on instead of the worn-out Santanic slogans of yore. A menace-à-trois between Andrew Eldritch, Jaz Coleman and Peter Hook."

06 BABY LACRIMARIUM

"Quite a traditional love song written by someone who takes the Poe in poetry a wee bit too seriously. A study on blocked tear ducts and The Cure."

07 SALUTE THE SANGUINE

"None of the ways out are easy, so taking the road less travelled is always the preferred method. 'If I could only say the same about the music,' mutters the little Devil on my shoulder."

08 IN TRENODIA

"A world-building exercise at its bleakest, 'Trenodia' representing a highly modified utopia lit by every shade of blue, with a suitably melancholy soundtrack played at the wrong speed."

09 HEARTFUL OF GHOSTS

"*Heartful Of Ghosts* is essentially a heart-wrenching tale of paranormal love and supernatural betrayal. Sonically, this lies somewhere between a lava lamp and acupuncture... with fangs."

10 SATURNINE SATURNALIA

"*Saturnine Saturnalia* is romantic doom and gloom at its very finest, and probably the most Sabbathian moment there is on the album. I dug out my Excalibur – the deranged fuzz pedal and vintage army flask-combo that Mige of Him built me many a moon ago – and tended to my tinnitus with gusto."

11 ZENER SOLITAIRE

"Imagine if this was Phil Spector's ghost reinterpreting Goblin's soundtrack for Dario Argento's movie *Suspiria* in glorious lo-fi."

12 VERTIGO EYES

"When you meet someone whose eyes are as hypnotic as watching the Vertigo logo spinning on your turntable, you're either in love or your drink has been spiked. This is a nod to the ghosts of the past, present and future, and a suitably hallucinatory way to end the record."

"LIFE IS SHORT. TIME IS NOT ENDLESS"

WORDS: POLLY GLASS • PICTURES: TIM TRONCKOE

From the pandemic to her recent cancer surgery, the last few years have been a rollercoaster for Nightwish's Floor Jansen. In February, she opened up to us on her brand-new chapter

It's Friday April 22, 2022 at Nokia Arena in Tampere, Finland. Fifteen thousand Nightwish fans await a much-delayed live taste of their heroes' ninth album, *Human. :II: Nature.*, released as the world shut down in 2020. Anticipation is high. The stage will soon be engulfed in enough fire to obliterate a small village. Aside from a handful of dates in Finland in 2021, this is Nightwish's first full-scale show in more than three years.

Backstage, Floor Jansen feels like death. In her stage armour she looks fearsome – a tattooed Boudica for the modern age. Such a gig wouldn't normally faze her. Floor, 41, has been fronting metal bands since she was 16. But just now she's come down with a virulent stomach flu at the worst possible time, and she's wondering how the hell she'll get through the next two hours onstage.

"It was unlike anything I've ever done," she says of the stomach flu that almost derailed that post-Covid comeback. "I mean, you get sick now and then, but this was brutal. I don't know what kind of virus I picked up, but it was a very violent one. I was up all night, and then I still had to travel from Berlin to Tampere. It was horrible." She shrugs. "But yeah, what can you do?"

It's not hard to see why Floor gets called a 'powerhouse'. Part opera singer, several parts rock star – with the dynamism of both – she exudes indestructibility. If Bruce Dickinson had a daughter with Xena: Warrior Princess, it would have been Floor.

But there are other sides to her: different personas that reveal a more complex, interesting picture of a 'powerhouse' lead singer. There's the animal-loving homebody. The thrillseeker. The proud vegetarian. The whiskey drinker. The metal icon with a solo pop album on the way. The Highly Sensitive Person, whose hyper-stimulated sense of the world shines through her performances. The person who, just three weeks before headlining Wembley Arena with Nightwish, underwent surgery for breast cancer.

"I'm always myself," she summarises, simply. "So whether I run around in jeans fixing a fence, or ride my horse, or go onstage in warrior outfits… it's all the same. It's just a different side, as you can see."

We meet Floor over Zoom in December, as she wrestles with dodgy wi-fi backstage in Milan. "Is it noisy for you, in the background?" she asks in perturbed Dutch tones. "It's basically one big open box here…"

Dark-eyed and slightly frazzled in a grey hoodie, Floor has a businesslike streak that softens as talk turns to things like her solo music, her bandmates and the cigars she enjoys with her husband, Sabaton drummer Hannes Van Dahl. On another day she might have come in from feeding the horses at her rural property on Sweden's west coast. You wouldn't fuck with her, but you'd gladly go for a drink with her.

Out on the road with Nightwish, there's a decent amount of the latter. The band "wobble" around Christmas markets drinking glühwein. They rate vegetarian food in Indian restaurants as part of a longstanding curry club. The shows themselves have been jubilant affairs. "Last night we were

"WHEN YOU HAVE A TUMOUR, YOU JUST THINK, 'GET IT OUT'"

Nightwish (left to right): Jukka Koskinen, Emppu Vuorinen, Tuomas Holopainen, Floor Jansen, Kai Hahto, Troy Donockley

surprised with some bottles of champagne," she grins, "which we then drank, and became very happy…"

It's all so far removed from lingering notions of Nightwish as some sort of dictatorship or soap opera, with singers driven away by its founder's maniacal demands. They seem like friends – as in, *actual* friends.

"It's absolute genuine fun," she nods. "We've always had that. And there are always ups and downs; it's like a big marriage. But we've been longing for this tour a *lot*. Especially after the pandemic, we don't take it for granted at all."

For Floor, the isolation of lockdown reinforced her ties to the band, but it also kickstarted her solo work. She'd begun to think of it in 2019, following an appearance on Dutch TV show *Beste Zangers* ('Best Singers'), but she was still very much a band person, with a new Nightwish album cycle around the corner.

Come March 2020, for the first time in her career, she found herself separated from that group mentality. She spent time with her husband and daughter, now five. She grew vegetables and looked after her horses, cats and enormous Irish wolfhound. She worked on her online profile, communicating with her fans on a regular, down-to-earth level.

At the same time, she began working with collaborators on solo material. An alternative, poppier sound started to brew. In spring 2022 she appeared on Germany's *Beste Zangers* equivalent, *Sing Meinen Song*, for which she sang in German (one of the four languages she speaks in addition to Dutch, English and Swedish). Gradually, a standalone Floor Jansen was evolving.

"My desire from the get-go was to find a sound that fits with me, not something created around me. But how do you do that? So I used up a large part of the pandemic in a trial-and-error search for this sound."

It wasn't easy. Ten years of bringing Tuomas Holopainen's visions to life had left her with phenomenal vocal skills, but limited songwriting practice. Her first ideas, she says, "weren't that great".

"I've done it [songwriting], but I haven't been doing much in the last 10 years," she admits. "Plus I'm in a band with someone like Tuomas. It makes me feel very small, like, 'What do I have to add to a world full of music?' So from that insecurity I had to find my way and accept that I am more limited, and that I have different ideas."

Teaming up with Dutch producer Gordon Groothedde (Snoop Dogg; Katie Melua; Floor's previous band, After Forever) was a turning point. The first song they wrote together was *Fire*. A darkly atmospheric, orchestral swirl of intelligent modern pop, with the grandeur of Florence & The Machine's cover of 1986 dance hit *You've Got The Love*, it ignited Floor's confidence as a creator in her own right.

"I have a really hard time with love songs," she says. "I know the majority of pop music is about love songs, and that's also why I find it boring to listen to. So I wanted to create something that still has a message."

Accordingly, her solo album, *Paragon*, shuns frothy clichés in favour of meatier subjects. *Fire* is about returning to life after lockdown. One song, *Invincible*, was written for the injured war veterans at Prince Harry's Invictus Games – originally planned to take place in 2020 in the Hague until the pandemic got in the way.

"It's inspired by the idea of being physically or mentally wounded, after you've just given everything you have," she explains, "and something that's left of you has to pick up life, and recover from something that you never really wanted to recover from. I want to raise awareness of the fact that this happens so incredibly often, but also to empower them. Like, 'You already went through Hell, now you're on your way back, you are invincible.'"

It's hard to hear this story now without thinking of Floor's recent health issues. Diagnosed in October 2022 at a routine mammogram screening, her breast cancer came as a total shock – two weeks before Nightwish were due to fly to South America.

"They [the doctors] said, 'We want you to come back.' And the thing I thought, in my naïve brain, was, 'Oh, they fucked up something with the pictures.' Never, 'Oh, they found something.'" She shakes her head. "Not a single moment. Until I was there."

Surgery was planned for the day after they came home. Until then, she says, the intense business of touring Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Mexico proved a good distraction. The pace of it all was brutal but helpful, and reading similar stories from her fans made her feel less alone – "But at the same time, it's an overwhelming awareness of how many people actually got this fucking disease.

"I put my emotions into the music," she reasons, "and also had really wonderful conversations within the band, crew, management, everyone has really been there for me. It's very tough to do it all that fast, but at the same time it helped because I didn't have to walk around with thoughts of it too long. Because as soon as you know you have a tumour in your body, the only thing you can think of is 'get it out'. The whole mental aspect of a cancer diagnosis is shit."

"A POWERFUL WOMAN IS IN TOUCH WITH HER EMOTIONS"

Back at home, she had three weeks after her operation before heading out in Europe and the UK. Scarred, bruised and exhausted, she was grateful for the support of her family. "*Jesus*, how I underestimated it," she half-laughs, of the recovery process. "I was jetlagged, I barely slept for nights after the surgery because my system was completely upside-down, you get morphine… So everyone's been really having my back in this."

Just a couple of days before the Wembley gig, she learned that the operation was successful. It was both a relief and a wake-up call. In Sweden, mammogram screenings start for women at the age of 40. In the Netherlands, her birthplace – and in the UK – it's 50. Now looked up to by many, as a public figure as well as a musician, she's determined to persuade more women to go for their scans.

"On a purely personal level it's a bit weird, because I'm just me," she says, of her role-model status. "But from this position, I have the power to make a difference every now and then. I wanted to make sure it has this function by saying, 'Go and get your mammogram done.' If I had stayed in the Netherlands, this entire thing would have gone undetected. It was so small when they took it out, but it was growing, you know? I'm very lucky."

Cancer casts a pervasive shadow, even when it's caught quickly. For Floor, who (when we speak to her) still has three weeks of radiation therapy to complete, it's realigned her priorities.

"It's not like I think 'I'm gonna die' all the time," she explains, "but I realise how life is short. Time is not endless. We have it now."

To that end, Floor is making the most of 2023. After her radiotherapy is finally over, she'll join Nightwish for 70000Tons Of Metal in the Bahamas. Festival shows will

FLOOR SHOW

The life and times of Floor Jansen

1981
Born in Goirle, the Netherlands.

1997
Joins Apocalypse, later to change their name to After Forever.

1999
Begins studying music at the Dutch Rock Academy. Enters the Conservatorium Tilburg three years later.

2009
Disbands After Forever and forms ReVamp, who release their self-titled debut album the following year.

2011
Suffers 'burnout', a form of depression. "I couldn't sing, I had a breakdown every time I tried," she later said.

2012
Plays first show with Nightwish in Seattle on October 1, just two days after the departure of previous vocalist Anette Olzon. Announced as Nightwish's permanent singer the following year.

2013
Duets with original Nightwish singer Tarja Turunen on a live cover of Gary Moore's *Over The Hills And Far Away*. "We are sisters in metal," she later says of their friendship.

2015
Makes recorded debut with Nightwish on *Endless Forms Most Beautiful*. Writes an open to letter to fans denying she is "an arrogant bitch" following abusive comments aimed at her online.

2016
Calls Slayer "a dreadful band" during a light-hearted interview with *Metal Hammer*, causing an inevitable furore online.

2017
Gives birth to daughter Freja.

2018
Releases debut album by side-project Northward, originally started a decade earlier.

2019
Appears on Dutch reality TV show *Beste Zangers* ('Best Singers'), and performs the Andrew Lloyd Webber song *The Phantom Of The Opera*.

2022
Reveals that she's been diagnosed with breast cancer. Subsequently announces that she is "cancer free" following surgery.

2023
Releases her debut album, *Paragon*, in March.

Touring is a vital part of Floor's happiness

follow. In the summer the band will head to the Röskö campsite in Kitee, Finland, to record the next Nightwish album (which will be released at some point in 2024). Part three of a trilogy that began with *Endless Forms Most Beautiful* and continued through *Human. :II: Nature.*, the new album will return to themes concerning our planet and our mortality. Sonically, Floor suggests, we can expect a heavy palette.

"I would say it's a pretty heavy album," she muses, "but once again, it's the multicolour diversity that is Nightwish. It's all there. It's going to once again take you by the hand through beautiful stories – whether they are stories from this Earth or stories about this Earth. They're beautiful."

Creatively, Nightwish is still Tuomas's brainchild, though there's a sense of collaboration around this record. Armed with his demos, the band have been working up different parts and exchanging ideas on tour – in hotel rooms and dressing rooms across the world. For Floor, this has been a happy arrangement.

"I think Tuomas has a unique view on the world and has a unique way of putting that into words," she says, "and I think he's outdone himself on that end once again. And also visually, the ideas that are bubbling are going to be of a next level. So yeah, there's lots to look forward to."

Meanwhile, along with the release of *Paragon*, she has solo gigs planned in Europe. "And of course it would be wonderful to go to the UK," she adds, "we are working on that as well."

If all goes to plan, Floor Jansen could be a name that reaches well beyond metal circles – paving the way for a new kind of pop star with a darker heart. Once again the 'powerhouse' label feels apt, with all the truths and misconceptions that come with it.

"Power is often connected to, especially women…" she searches for the words, "…it's like, 'powerful women are bitches', you know? Maybe that's the misconception of the century. But a powerful woman is also a woman who is in touch with her emotions, and one who can have absolute soft sides and embrace them. The idea that high sensitivity would be a weakness? *That* is actually the absolute misperception.

"I HAVE A HARD TIME WITH LOVE SONGS"

"And that goes for men, too: for men to be in touch with their feelings and to be able to communicate them… that is a bigger strength than [makes growling, macho noise]. That's going to bring us a whole lot further."

Between travels, Floor will recharge at home in the Swedish countryside. On cold evenings, she and Hannes sometimes retreat to their grillhouse, light the fire and relax over single malts and a cigar – things that bonded them when they first met on tour with Iced Earth. Small connections between worlds.

"I can say that my happiest place is home, but that's not true because after half a year I'll claw up the walls," she laughs. "I can say it's on tour, but after a month I really want to go home. I can say it's onstage, but then putting my daughter to bed is equally amazing at times. The ultimate thing is to have the luxury of both."

NIGHTWISH'S *HUMAN. :II: NATURE. TOUR EDITION* IS OUT NOW VIA NUCLEAR BLAST. THE BAND ARE WORKING ON A NEW RECORD, DUE SOMETIME IN 2024. FLOOR'S SOLO ALBUM, *PARAGON*, IS OUT NOW VIA REVAMP MUSIC

TINA KORHONEN

FIVE MINUTES WITH TARJA TURUNEN

Symphonic metal's original queen reflects on Nightwish, recovering from illness, and why she's making a fresh start

WORDS: MATT MILLS

You've said before that Nightwish's music was meant to be downbeat and acoustic, but your voice pushed them into a more metal direction. Would you have been miserable if they had remained a folk band?
"That's difficult because, at that time, I really wanted to be an operatic singer and that was the only voice I had. I wasn't able to do much with it beyond full-on power, so it didn't fit nicely with the acoustic music we started with."

You were one of the first female lead singers in that more symphonic end of power metal. Who's the most famous person that's come up to you and called you an influence?
"Simone Simons [lead singer of Epica]. She was just like, [starts bowing]. Ha ha ha! It's funny, I've just come home from a tour and one of the girls in one of the support bands was singing backstage. My musicians turned to me and said, 'This is completely your fault, Tarja.' Ha ha!"

2022 marked 25 years since the first Nightwish album, *Angels Fall First*. What do you think of that album now?
"I am looking at the gold record hanging on the wall right now. It was kind of a second demo for us. When we were making it, we had no idea that it would become a complete album or bring us a record deal. It was very exciting. We were so young that, when I listen to myself, it's unbearable. Ha ha ha! But, hey, everybody needs to start somewhere."

Nightwish fired you using an open letter that was publicly shared. What's your relationship with them all these years later?
"The only guy that I had contact with was Marko [Hietala, bass], but he's no longer in the band. I even sang with him some years ago. The rest, it's been emailing. Everything is fine but we're not in touch. That all died a long time ago. I wrote Tuomas [Holopainen, Nightwish band leader] a message when his father passed, so we're fine."

"MY STROKE WAS CAUSED BY STRESS"

PRESS/TIM TRONCKOE

Do you want more of a relationship with them, or are you happy with how things are?
"I'm happy. I don't have any regrets. I hope they're happy."

You're releasing a new retrospective of your solo career called *Living The Dream*. Why is now the time for a best-of album?
"It took catastrophically long to come up with this record because we had the Covid pandemic; I'm still doing those tours that have been postponed since 2020. I feel like this is a good time because *In The Raw*, my last album, was my most personal. It came from the shock of my stroke [in 2018] and the struggles with my health. Now, I can release this and start again. It can be the platform for a new album and new start."

How are you feeling nowadays?
"I'm very good, thank you. Probably in a better condition than ever, physically. The stroke was caused by stress. I'm an artist, not the boss, so when my husband [who's also Tarja's manager] stayed home [and I went on tour], I needed to handle things I was not ready to face. When there was a problem, people came to me."

Why did he stay home?
"Our daughter had been touring with me since she was a baby and, when she turned four, we wanted her to go to school. I had to leave [to go on tour] and closing that door was a bitch. That was the hardest thing to do."

How did you recover?
"I got a mentor. I had talks with a very old Argentinian man that were a sort of therapy. He just made me realise that I need positive people around me, so that my artistic wings can spread wide open and I can be happy."

What can you tell us about that new album you mentioned?
"I'm currently writing songs for it, but I can already say to you that it's pretty heavy. It's because of my live band. They are absolutely amazing musicians and, when they play, it's a massive support for me and my big voice. They lift me up with their energy, so this is going to be really powerful, with metal guitars and grooving bass and drums."

***BEST OF: LIVING THE DREAM* IS OUT NOW VIA EAR MUSIC. HEAD TO WWW.METALHAMMER.COM FOR MORE TARJA UPDATES**

BABYMETAL

INTO THE METALVERSE

This year, Babymetal returned with a wild new concept album. But what did it all mean? And were we getting a third member? We flew to Tokyo for answers

WORDS: ELEANOR GOODMAN • INTERVIEW TRANSLATION: TYLER MARIKO MCABEE

ART DIRECTION & DESIGN: YODAMETAL (ROKUSHIKI) • DESIGN: RINOMETAL (ROKUSHIKI) • PHOTOGRAPHY: SUSUMETAL (PROGRESS-M)

Clap-clap, clap-clap-clap, clap-clap-clap-clap, "Yon yon!" Clap-clap, clap-clap-clap, clap-clap-clap-clap, "Yon yon!" The chant fills the thick air of the windowless, wood-panelled restaurant as 130 Babymetal fans at an aftershow party raise their glasses and cheer. Some have painted their faces white like Babymetal's backing musicians, the Kami Band, and many sport official merch or custom t-shirts. All are ecstatic.

Metal Hammer are in Chiba prefecture, 30 miles east of Tokyo. It's Sunday January 29, 2023 and we've just witnessed the second of two consecutive Babymetal shows at the Makuhari Messe convention centre in the company of 15,000 other fans. As with every Babymetal gig we've seen, they were loud, colourful and unlike anything else out there.

Yet until recently, there was no certainty that a Babymetal performance, or a party like this, would ever happen again. On October 10, 2021 (10/10/2021), following a 10-date series of shows to celebrate 10 years of Babymetal, a mysterious announcement online proclaimed the band had been 'sealed'. No one knew when or whether they'd return.

Then, exactly a year and a day later, there was another announcement: 'the seal would finally be lifted' with a 'two-day performance' called Babymetal Returns – The Other One. A concept album, also called *The Other One*, would follow.

Back at the gathering, superfan Susumu – more on him later – says he felt conflicted about the news. "I had a mixture of anxiety and anticipation," he remembers. "Is the Kami Band alive and well? Could they possibly become virtual or a backing track? But on the other hand, I was hopeful that I would be able to see their amazing performance again and experience Babymetal live with my whole body."

Later, Babymetal co-vocalist Moametal will explain the reasons behind the duo's hiatus to *Metal Hammer*. "It's been 10 years of purely pushing forward and not looking back in order to achieve Metal Resistance," she will say. "Taking a breather allowed me to take a step back and really appreciate how much love I have for Babymetal. So, I truly hope our fans understand that being sealed was an essential time for us."

Still, other questions remain: What's the story behind their new album? Will they ever bring in a permanent third member to replace the much-missed Yui, who departed in 2018? And what does their future hold? We've come to Tokyo for answers.

Twenty-four hours earlier, we arrive at concrete behemoth Makuhari Messe for show one. In the foyer is a monument bearing the handprints of the wrestling and fencing athletes who won gold medals here during the Tokyo 2020 Olympics.

With his pink hair, matching pink t-shirt emblazoned with the words 'Funky Metal Babys' and oversized yellow glasses, Babymetal fan Kenji resembles 90s UK personality Timmy Mallet. He's been to more than 20 Babymetal shows. But for his Sanrio rabbit puppet My Melody, it's the first one. Near some lockers, a posse dressed like the Kami Band amasses, in full facepaint and white robes.

By a bank of vending machines, we get talking to Uyu-metal, who's wearing cute black satin bows in her hair and sings in tribute band Dizzymetal, which formed in 2015. Why the name Dizzymetal? "We love alcohol! Good songs and drinks make us dizzy!" She laughs and waves her arms around her head, to illustrate her point. What does she think will happen tonight? "A big bang! Ha ha ha! Moametal, Su-metal… big bang!"

Moametal raises her staff at the start of Babymetal's stunning show

PRESS/TAKU FUJII

"TEN PARALLEL WORLDS WERE DISCOVERED"

SU-METAL

At the guestlist desk, we're handed a grey and black 'Savior Mask' to slip over our plain one. Currently in Japan, masks must be worn when you're within two metres of someone else, even outside. The good news is that, just yesterday, the government lifted restrictions on concerts, meaning people are now allowed to shout loudly.

An usher hurries us to our seat, and we watch messages loop on the big screens in each corner of the room. They include: 'Please wear your Savior Mask at all times', 'No smart phones' and 'No banners' – each accompanied by a cute skeleton illustration. The most entertaining ones are 'No other nuisances', alongside an image of two side-by-side skeletons getting clonked on the head by a crowd surfer, and 'No big head costumes', showing a skeleton wearing an oversized Fox God head.

At 6.10pm, the lights go out. A video message plays, accompanied by a voiceover: "The time has come for us to unify our voices once again," it declares. "The Fox Gate is where a new journey begins."

Ten figures robed in black march slowly down a central aisle, bathed in blue light, to the suspenseful intro of *Metal Kingdom* – the first track on *The Other One*. Each bears a golden staff that looks like an upside-down pair of scissors, two large Os sticking out the top to represent the album title. At the head of the aisle, lights illuminate two enormous, stone-grey doors with fox heads carved into them, eyes glowing red. The doors part, and a platform wreathed in dry ice slides out to reveal three ornate thrones: Su-metal sits in the middle, Moametal is to her left… and the other throne is empty. ▶

Su-metal wants to collab with Rammstein. Make it happen, Fox God!

BABYMETAL

Moametal says the band needed to go on hiatus to recharge their batteries

Moametal walks down the aisle while Su-metal starts to sing, and then she turns to face her bandmate. They end up on either side of a round stage in the middle of the walkway, sweeping and raising intricate tridents, before stepping forwards. Their podium rises. Firework showers detonate along the length of the gangway, causing a ripple of awe. Uyu-metal was right!

Since Yui left the band, Su and Moa have appeared with one of a revolving cast of dancers, dubbed 'The Avengers'. This time they're joined by Momoko, formerly of Babymetal's previous band, Sakura Gakuin. The trio run through *Divine Attack - Shingeki – The Other One*'s second song – on the round stage, which by this point has moved to the other end of the venue, in front of another static stage featuring the Kami Band. Still with us?

During *Pa Pa Ya!!*, red and orange lights flash as pyro explodes, while the crowd whirl souvenir scarves above their heads like a Japanese version of Skindred's Newport Helicopter. New Bring Me-inflected song *Monochrome* begins with a round of gunfire drumming, and the girls are thrown into dramatic light and shade. "Take your phone out!" yells Su. "Turn on your light!" The sight is breathtaking.

But the most WTF moment comes during upbeat 2013 classic *Doki Doki * Morning*. Before the song, the words 'The Other One. In The Metalverse Of Madness' flash onto screens in the Marvel font. A voiceover says that beyond the Fox Gate, there is a world we can't even imagine. A parallel world, in which there exists a lifeform beyond comprehension – but are they a threat, or are they a friend? The gate of the new world is about to open…

"THERE WERE TIMES I FELT I WAS NOT LOVED"

MOAMETAL

The girls begin on the round stage, in front of the Kami Band – who, despite being out of the spotlight tonight, are Slipknot levels of thunderous. It glides towards the middle of the room – and then, *another* round stage sails up to meet it. Another round stage with *another* Babymetal on it, dressed in the red-and-black colour scheme of their earlier days. They mirror each other's dancing, collapsing in a heap at the end. It is truly surreal. Then they disappear, as if they were never there.

During *Metal Kingdom*, a stone 'Fox Gate' opens to reveal the duo on thrones

There's one more surprise. After closer *The Legend*, the Kami Band vanish. In near darkness, on opposite sides of the stage, Su and Moa ascend a flight of stairs, red horizontal strip lights appearing with every step. They pause in front of neon white coffin outlines, and a booming noise rings out like an advert for Dolby surround sound.

The lights come up. It's only 7.30pm, but it feels like we've been inside their Metalverse for hours.

The next afternoon, several hundred Babymetal fans assemble for a group photo on a staircase outside Makuhari Messe. Tipped off by a Tweet from ChiyoMetal, owner of a Fox God-themed bar in Tokyo's bustling Shinjuku, we've come to take a look.

One of the fans on the staircase is Ukky, an engineer from Kawasaki, an hour and a half away. Ukky has been a Babymetal fan "for about five or six years". He's wearing a new Babymetal hoodie and holding a purple puppet of the Kami Band's Ohmura Takayoshi. Impressively, it plays a pink guitar. It turns out he built it himself.

"This took about a month to make," he says with a smile. "First I bought a book about how to make a puppet, and then I made the guitar with a 3D printer."

Ukky is part of a Facebook group called Bokuchi-kai. They're having an aftershow meet-up at a nearby izakaya ▶

BABYMETAL X SABATON

Cake! Tacos! Potatoes! Su and Moa answered some questions from their 2023 UK tourmates, Sabaton

What's the best thing about being in Babymetal?
Su-metal: "Meeting so many legends! We had the honour of collaborating with Rob Halford from Judas Priest, and we were the opening act for Metallica, who introduced me to metal music."

If Sabaton could offer you any Swedish dish, which one would you want?
Moametal: "I definitely want to try Kroppkaka and Hasselbackspotatis! I am a potato lover, so I definitely cannot pull these two off my list. Also, [layered cream cake] Prinsesstårta! But Su-metal doesn't have as much of a sweet tooth, so I'll have it all to myself! Ha ha! I hope they feed us a ton! I would love to try Sabaton's recommendations also!"

What are you most looking forward to on the tour?
Su-metal: "To see our fans and perform! Doing show after show is hard work but, due to the pandemic, I've been itching to perform again and I've come to realise that I truly love it."

Being Japanese, where do you experience the biggest cultural differences on tour?
Moametal: "There are many instances when I feel cultural differences. But to be honest, I've never struggled with it. One thing I would say is Japan's restrooms are very clean and efficient, and so I would love to see other restrooms around the world become like ours. Also, I'm always surprised at the bigger portion sizes outside of Japan. I like to try a variety of food, so I love sharing food with Su-metal and our team. To be able to experience touring around the world is so rewarding, as I get to see so many cultural differences and so many people!"

Did you grow up listening to the 'classic metal bands', or do you come from a different background?
Su-metal: "I would listen to the bands that Babymetal's music was inspired by, like Metallica, Limp Bizkit, Bring Me The Horizon and Dragonforce."
Moametal: "I'd never listened to metal bands before Babymetal. I love Japanese anime culture, so I'd listen to anime songs and J-pop and J-rock. I still like that genre of music, but I'm really lucky that Babymetal introduced me to metal."

PRESS/TAKU FUJII

"I SPOKE TO THE BACKSTREET BOYS ABOUT COLLABORATING!"

MOAMETAL

– a type of informal restaurant, where groups of friends or colleagues meet to let loose – but he can't attend, because he has to get home to his family.

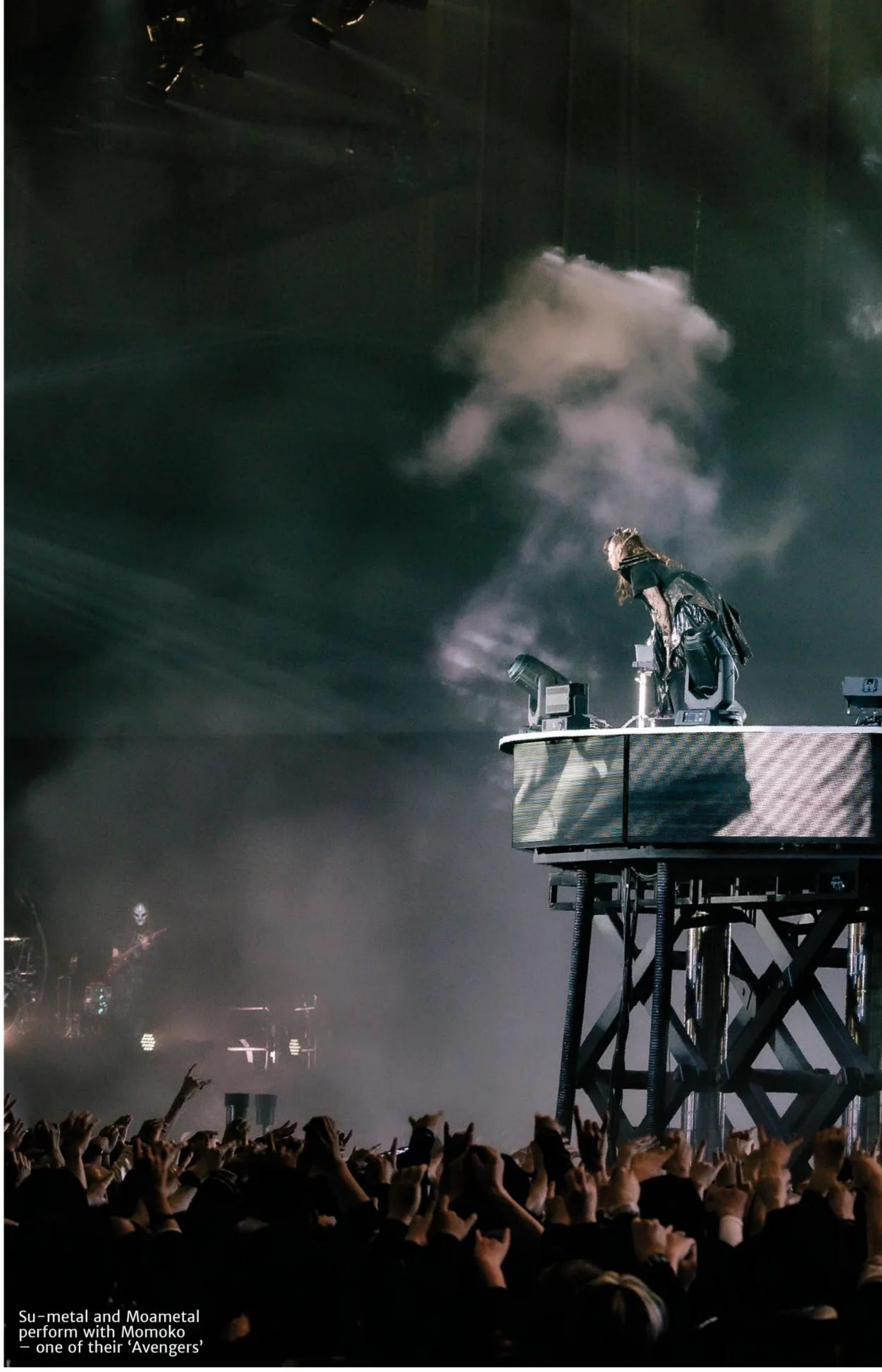
Can *we* go to the meet-up?

He smiles and says he thinks it'll be OK, but he'll have to ask his Leader. We exchange email addresses, and he takes a selfie with us as proof of identity. Then, we wait.

At 5pm, show two begins. This time, we notice more details. The new songs are mid-paced and mature, with choreography to match – there's a greater emphasis on hand gestures, rather than frantic jumps or exaggerated facial expressions, making the likes of *Gimme Chocolate!!* seem sweetly ironic. It's not surprising, given Su is now 25 and Moa is 23. Later, Su will tell us that *Divine Attack - Shingeki* is the first song she's written lyrics for. "From here, a new journey begins once again. It is a song about our determination to pave another path," she will say mysteriously.

The audience are rowdier, too, perhaps now accustomed to shouting behind their masks. Although there's a special 'Silent Mosh'sh Pit' area for people who have children or just don't want to get pushed around, the regular pit goes off for *Headbangeeeeerrrrr!!!!!* with its 'dogeza headbanging', where people fall to their knees and bow.

It's pretty much the same show as last night, but, because this is Babymetal, there's one final reveal. Fox Day – April 1 – will bring a new stage for Babymetal, "together with a departure into a new world". Two more shows are announced, for April 1 and 2 at Yokohama's Pia Arena. Then, Su-metal and Moametal advance to their coffins like before. But this time, a *third* coffin appears in the middle, together with an unknown third person, their back to the audience. The atmosphere is electric.



Su-metal and Moametal perform with Momoko – one of their 'Avengers'

The venue is emptying, and from backstage we can hear Bury Tomorrow's *Earthbound* blasting over the PA. A rep from Amuse, Babymetal's management company, appears with Su and Moa. They are still in their costumes, their holographic neck-pieces shining brightly under the harsh lighting. We congratulate them on the shows – so much energy! – and they say 'thank you', eyes smiling above white masks.

The Amuse rep asks if we noticed anything different about tonight's show. Yes, we say – there was a third coffin! And a third member! But who is it? "Only the Fox God knows!" they giggle in unison. Well, it was worth a shot…

We ask about the hiatus. The band were only gone for a year, and during that time, they obviously worked on fourth album *The Other One*. Yet, with a question mark hanging over their future, it felt like much longer for fans. Was there any doubt about the band continuing?

"I love Babymetal. I love our team, I love our fans more than anything, and everyone at *Metal Hammer*," says Moa. "But to be honest, there have been times when I felt unsure if I could continue or not. Words or attitude without any love will hurt people. There were times when no matter how much I put into performing, I felt as if I was not loved.

"At that moment in time, someone at *Metal Hammer* said, 'Your dancing is incredible! I can't imagine Babymetal without the dance component!' I felt so happy to hear and realise that people notice my dancing. Being commended is always a great feeling, and as I'm saying this, I realise I'm so basic, aren't I? Ha ha!"

We ask for more details about why she felt she wasn't loved, but none are forthcoming – though when musicians express sentiments like this, it's often related to unkind commentators online. Moving on to *The Other One*, we try to uncover more about the concept.

"It's about Babymetal's other story in which 10 parallel worlds were discovered," says Su. "All 10 tracks are based on myths, and each track represents a myth."

The myths are drawn from many countries, not just Japan, and the 10 worlds are called Cavalry, Illusions, Coffin, Inverted Mirror Reflection, Monochrome, Smoke, Light And Darkness, Transition, Mirror and Throne. In October 2021, back when the band was 'sealed', a new piece of merch called Black Box was released, featuring postcards of the band depicted in these parallel worlds, plus online access to snippets of unreleased music. These snippets were then 'restored' to become the songs on *The Other One*. No doubt we'll spend *hours* trying to make sense of the concept.

"It's a bit difficult, isn't it?" smiles Moa. "To put it simply, it's like Babymetal existing in a world separate from the

one we see now. And I think the title points to that 'other' Babymetal that exists in a parallel universe."

When we ask who was in the alternative Babymetal during *Doki Doki * Morning*, we don't get an answer…

Babymetal founder/producer/Fox God emissary Kobametal materialises. It took him two–three months to think up the production for these comeback shows, he explains. Once he had the idea for the symbol for *The Other One* – two interlinking Os that represent the infinity symbol – it came to him quickly, and he's already planning for April. The trio thank us for coming, and present us with a gift bag containing a t-shirt and a transparent coffin keyring. We wave goodbye and leave them to a well-earned rest.

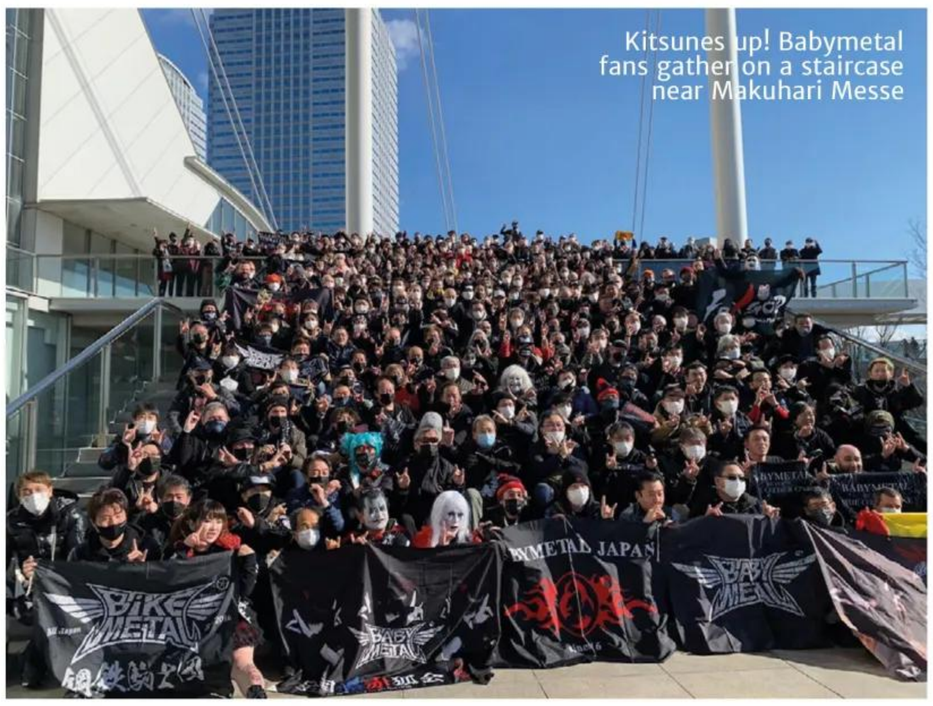
Back in the foyer of Makuhari Messe, we check our inbox. There's an email from Ukky about the aftershow get-together, containing the address of the restaurant: Inawaraya Kaihin-makuhariten, on the first floor of the Excellio Makuhari shopping mall, a 20-minute walk down Chiba's wide, immaculate streets. The Leader has approved our request.

When we arrive at the door, a stern-looking man in a Babymetal t-shirt is sitting behind a wooden table with some papers attached to a clipboard – presumably a guestlist – and he won't let us in. After several minutes of back and forth, he goes inside, and returns with a man wearing a name badge that says 'Vins Metal'. "*Metal Hammer*?" We nod, and he opens the door.

Vins Metal introduces us to the Leader – Susumu. Grinning from ear to ear, he leads us up the room and yells, "*METAL HAMMER*!" In response, everyone rises and cheers "*METAL HAMMER*!", some standing on their seats and others filming us on their phones.

Susumu grabs hold of Hiroshi, a 74-year-old senior research assistant at Virginia Tech in the US, who's fluent in English. He waves his arm, and everyone sitting along the side of his table immediately gets up, abandoning their food and drinks to make way for us. We remove our shoes and take a seat.

Susumu discovered Babymetal after his son showed him the video for *Akatsuki*, but when he went to see the band by himself, he felt lonely and walked out. Back then, you often had to apply for VIP tickets via a lottery, meaning many people ended up in the same position. Plus, he admits, many have wives and girlfriends who don't like Babymetal, and aren't interested in seeing them live. In Japanese, a 'bochi' is a person who attends a gig alone, so the Facebook group he formed in 2018 is called 'Bokuchi-kai', meaning 'The lonely fox'. It has 940 members.



Kitsunes up! Babymetal fans gather on a staircase near Makuhari Messe

What does his own wife think of the group? Susumu lets out a long laugh, and Hiroshi interprets. "Disgusted? No, actually, it's a very difficult word in Japanese, because it's a combination of 'disgusted' plus 'I've given up'! So, he's already paid 10,000 Euros ahead of time for tonight, so if nobody came, he'd be short. And he says, keep it a secret, because his wife doesn't know about it! Ha ha!"

Luckily, the izakaya is packed. A stream of excitable members come over for selfies, and present us with homemade gifts. Mota-Metal hands us a sticker that riffs on the Red Hot Chili Peppers logo, and KIMI3 gives us a wooden keyring with a shiny golden fox head attached, plus a phone charm depicting Su-metal and Moametal on their thrones. Minako-Metal gifts us a sticker of herself, and thanks us for including a photo of her and her friends dressed as the Kami Band in our last Babymetal feature.

Periodically, the chant from 4 no Uta breaks out: clap-clap, clap-clap-clap, clap-clap-clap-clap, "Yon yon!"

When the night's over, we gather outside for photos. As we thank Susumu for his hospitality, he pumps his fist in the air and yells '*METAL HAMMER*!' some more, and everyone follows his cue. We respond with a Babymetal-style "See youuuuu!" And the group choruses "See youuuu!" and waves goodbye.

Su-metal ushers Babymetal into the next chapter of their mysterious story

"IT WOULD BE SO COOL TO BLOW FIRE!"

SU-METAL

These gigs, and the imminent release of *The Other One*, mark a major new chapter in the Babymetal story. Since their initial burst of virality in 2014, they have been working towards establishing themselves as a bona fide metal band with staying power. If second album *Metal Resistance* capitalised on their newfound fame, and 2019's *Metal Galaxy* cemented it with collaborators such as Sabaton's Joakim Brodén and Arch Enemy's Alissa White-Gluz, *The Other One* feels like a sleeker, more grown-up statement about Babymetal in 2023. Or Babymetal and their interdimensional counterparts, to be exact.

"The theme this time around was The Other One – the other Babymetal we never knew existed. Therefore, this concept album needed to be comprised only of us," says Moametal. "Although no guest singers were involved, now that I think about it, since we're exploring the Babymetal from another dimension we never knew existed, maybe *we* are the guest singers!"

The girls still have ambitions to fulfil. Su-metal would like to collaborate with Bring Me The Horizon once again, for instance.

Moametal's are more… unexpected. "Recently, I had the opportunity to speak to the Backstreet Boys and we spoke about how we would love to perform together," she reveals. "I think it would be so fun and interesting to go beyond genres and collaborate with them. Also, I would love to collaborate with Måneskin. I was surprised to hear that they were actually younger than us, because I totally thought they were older than me. But us both being in the same generation, I feel so inspired and also motivated."

In turn, Babymetal have paved the way for the next generation. Later this week, we go for dinner with rising metallers Hanabie. With a song called *We Love Sweets* and an immense sense of fun, singer Yukina cites them as an influence. "I feel honoured that a Japanese band like us is getting a lot of attention," says Su-metal. "I would love to be onstage with them one day."

As for the immediate future, the third member (Momoko? Yui?!), and the parallel-universe (Doki Doki * Morning Babymetal?) All we can do is cross our kitsunes and hope for more intel on Fox Day.

"Babymetal is constantly growing and evolving, and I believe change is always good," says Moametal. "At times, I want to be a bit lazy and slack off, but when I think about your radiant smiles, I know I need to shake it off and do my best! Even while I am being interviewed right now, I am growing, so I don't want you to miss a single second of it. Please keep your eyes on us, OK?"

THE OTHER ONE IS OUT NOW 4 VIA COOKING VINYL.
FOR FURTHER UPDATES ON ALL THINGS BABYMETAL, STAY TUNED TO WWW.METALHAMMER.COM

PRESS/TAKU FUJII

FIVE MINUTES WITH

ASHANTI MUTINTA BACKXWASH

The trap metal pioneer talks horror movies, dream collabs and history's greatest trilogies

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL

We understand your new album is the culmination of a trilogy…
"Yeah, starting with *God Has Nothing To Do With This Leave Him Out Of It* to *I Lie Here Buried With My Rings And My Dresses* and this new album, *His Happiness Shall Come First Even Though We Are Suffering*, is the culmination of me going back and back in time. This one takes me back to my earliest memories and ends there. I like to compare albums to movies, the sequencing and pacing. This is like the end of a horror franchise when they close the door on the protagonist and they can move on."

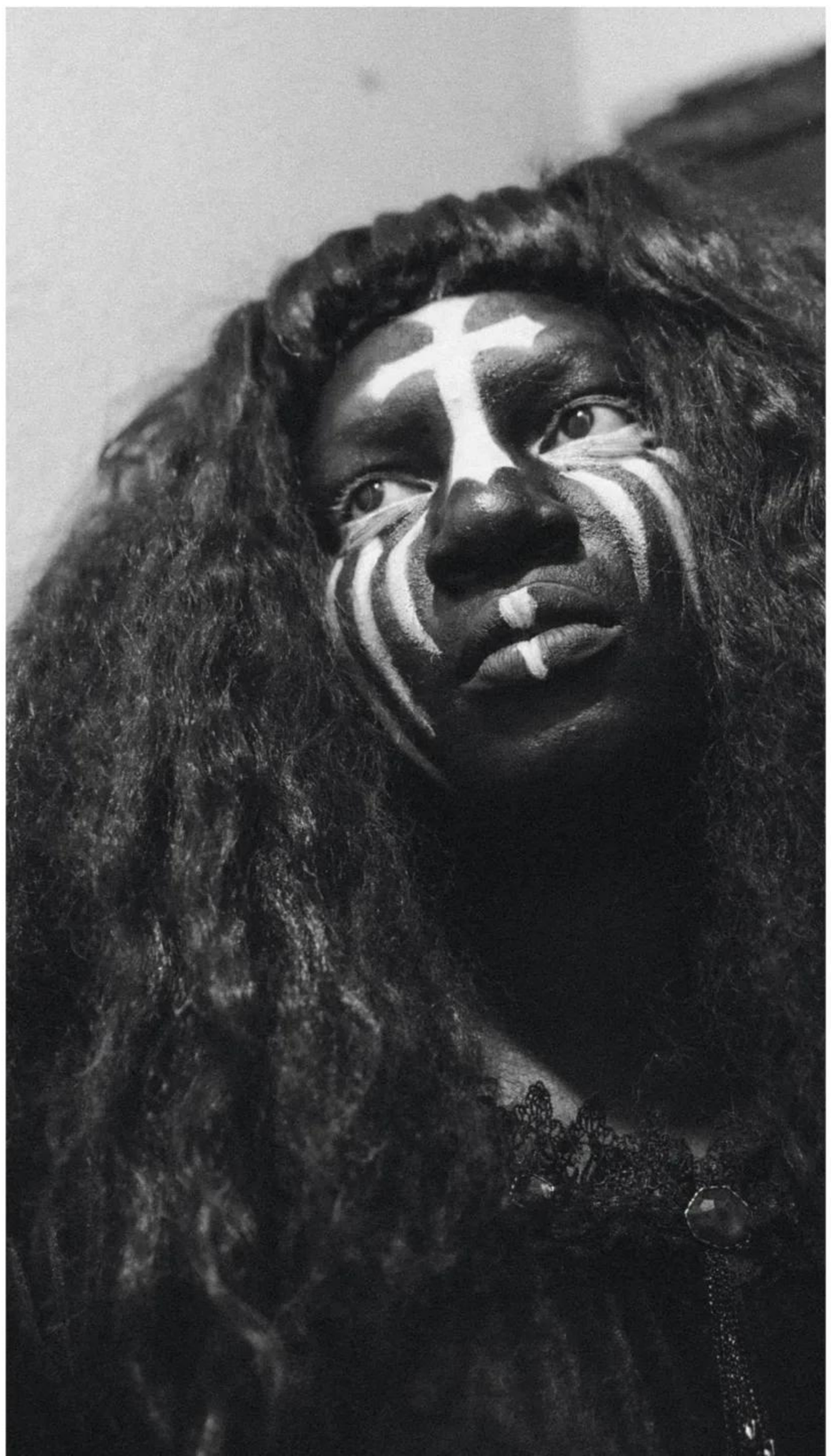
So is it a happy ending?
"Relatively happy, yeah! Even though you're still living in the hellscape you have fond memories of where you came from."

What's the next chapter going to look like?
"I don't know, I haven't thought about it yet. I don't think it'll be me talking about my own personal experiences, though. When it comes to this section of my life, this is essentially everything I have to say. The soundscape and the content has to be different… but that doesn't mean it's going to be happy, bright guitars!"

We were delighted to see Pupil Slicer appear on the new record!
"Yeah! I like the band, especially Katie [Davies] as a vocalist, I was a fan. I had this beat I created and it kinda reminded me of mathcore – the textures and the bounce. I sent it to Pupil Slicer and they sent back this hook, and when I wrote the verses it all just blended together. I'm a fan of them as a band and as people."

You've done some amazing collabs – who would be top of the pile for you to work with next?
"That's a tough one! I'm now addicted to doing my own instrumentation, so I would do that, but it's hard to know when you haven't made the music yet! You have to wait for the music to speak to you… but… my dream collaboration is Trent Reznor and Danny Brown."

"YOU'RE STILL LIVING IN THE HELLSCAPE, BUT WITH FOND MEMORIES"



PRESS/MÉCHANT VAPORWAVE

You've made an album trilogy now, but, in your opinion, what is the greatest trilogy ever made in any artistic medium?
"That's a good question! I mean, *The Godfather* is pretty damn perfect but that is such a regular answer. So many people say that! This is a tough question!"

It's always the third one that lets them down! Look at *Aliens* or *Back To The Future*!
"Ha ha! It's so true! Same with *The Matrix* as well! I really like the first two, but I'm not sweet on the third one… it's difficult to pinpoint!"

Well, your third instalment is amazing, maybe the best of the three. So maybe it is you!
"Ha ha ha! Well, thank you! I'm honoured! I'm actually curious to hear The Weeknd's trilogy as well, so I'll say that."

You've always had long album titles. Are there any you think are *too* long?
"Yes! The Fiona Apple one [2012's *The Idler Wheel Is Wiser Than The Driver Of The Screw And Whipping Chords Will Serve You More Than Ropes Will Ever Do*]! That's really long! But I like them long; I don't need things short and sweet."

You had two songs used in the TV show *Work In Progress*. Are there any other shows or movies that would be a dream for you to have your music in?
"Oh yeah, [production company] A24 abso-fucking-lutely. The whole mood they give off and the stuff they make goes really well with what I do. The only thing I don't like of theirs is the term 'elevated horror', it kinda reminds me of 'intelligent dance music' which… you know, dance music is dance music, why does it have to be intelligent? But, A24, I'm a big fan, and if they approached me I'd clear my whole fucking schedule."

We know you're a big horror fan. What's the all-time greatest horror movie?
"*The Blair Witch Project*! No contest, it's incredible. Just the simpleness of it… the thing that I hate the most in horror movies is the build-up to this antagonist and you see it and all of your expectations are crushed. 'That's not that scary!' But *Blair Witch* never needed that – no bells and whistles, cheap VHS camera, authentic reactions… that's all they needed."

***HIS HAPPINESS SHALL COME FIRST EVEN THOUGH WE ARE SUFFERING* IS OUT NOW**

THE NORSE CODE

Sabaton went and conquered their own island! Well, *kinda*. As their mission to conquer Europe continued, we went to Gotland to find out what the hell was going on

WORDS: DAVE EVERLEY • PHOTOGRAPHY: STEVE BRIGHT

Stand on Visby's rocky beach and gaze out across the roiling sea, and it's easy to imagine a fleet of wooden ships heaving into view over the horizon, bearing an army of snarling invaders ready to subjugate its inhabitants, or worse.

Dating from the Viking Age, this picture-postcard medieval town is the biggest settlement on the Swedish island of Gotland – a hunk of rock measuring 100 miles by 30 miles, located halfway between mainland Sweden to the west and Latvia to the east. Visby has been fought over down the centuries by the Swedes, the Danes, the Hanseatic League and more, and it has the ruined city walls to prove it.

Another army has invaded Gotland today. This one numbers just five people, and furs and armour have been replaced by puffer jackets and beanie hats to protect against the fearsome wind battering them. They've been standing with their backs to the waves for the last 15 minutes for a photoshoot, and the cold is getting to them. Sabaton may be the most successful Swedish metal band of the 21st century, but they clearly haven't inherited their ancestors' hardy genes.

"I think we've done enough," says the band's usually laidback bassist and Joint Chief Of Staff Pär Sundström tetchily. "We have a show to play."

A gig is fairly unusual in Gotland. In a few hours, Sabaton will play the local ice hockey arena, the fourth gig of a 20-date tour of some of Sweden's furthest-flung outposts. The last vaguely famous rock group to come to Visby were Swedish glam-metal C-listers Hardcore Superstar. That was in 2021. The next one is… well, there is no 'next one', beyond a few low-level Swedish bar acts.

"We called the people who ran the venue and said, 'We want to do a show'," says Pär, grumpiness gone. "They said, 'When?' and we said, 'February.' They said, 'Why would you want to be here in February? Nothing happens!'"

So why *do* you want to be here in February?

"Why not?" he says, with the grin of man who has made it this far without other people telling him how to do things, and isn't about to start listening to them now.

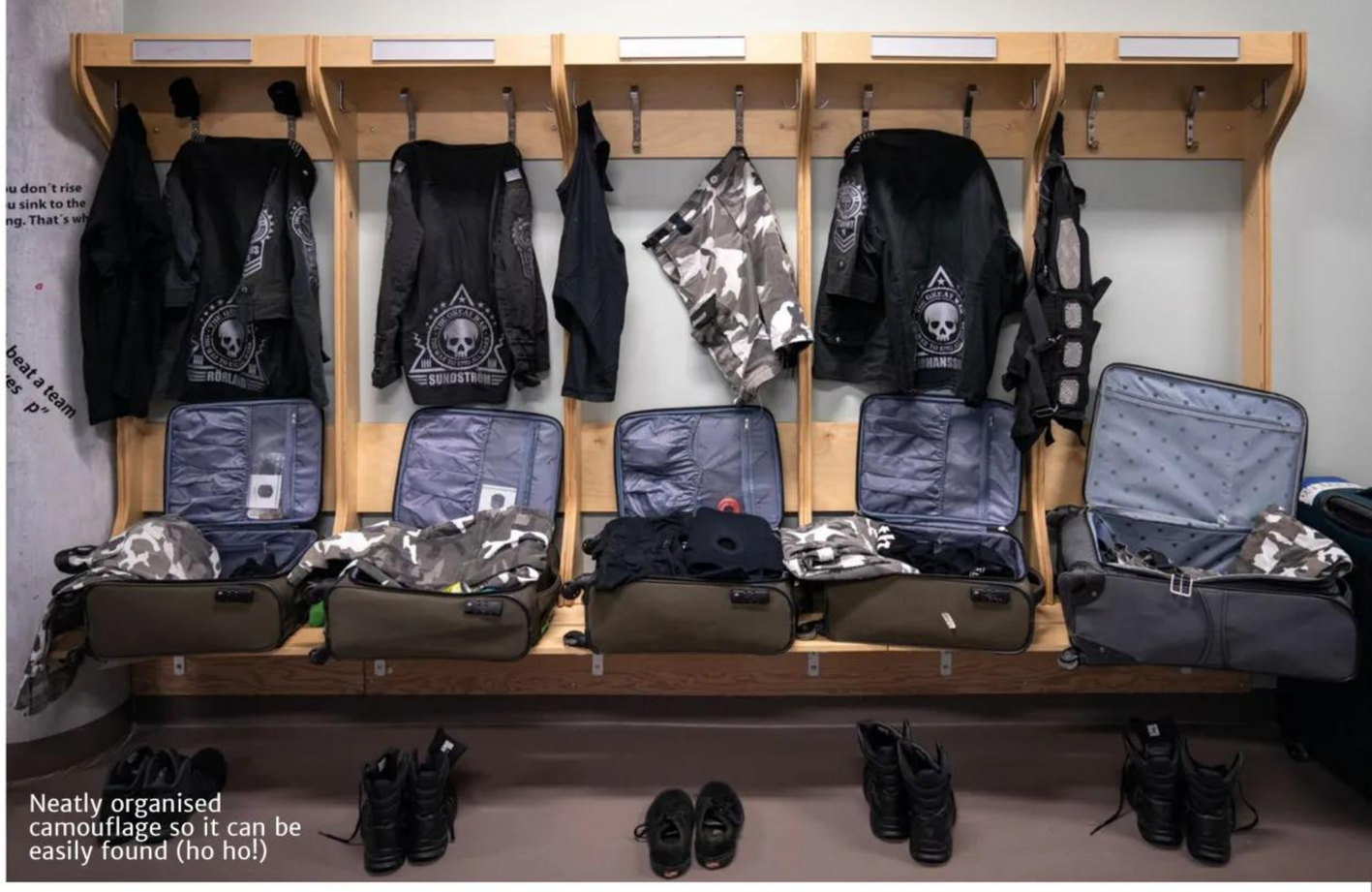
A 2,000-capacity ice hockey hall on a windswept Baltic island is a long way from the kind of places that Sabaton normally play these days. In April, they kick off a full European tour with four UK arena dates, featuring support from Babymetal and Finnish panto-metallers Lordi.

"We're only the third Swedish band to headline Wembley Arena, after Abba and Roxette," says singer Joakim Brodén proudly, as we sit in the lobby of the waterfront hotel that has been commandeered as a temporary barracks by the band and several of their 50-strong crew and entourage.

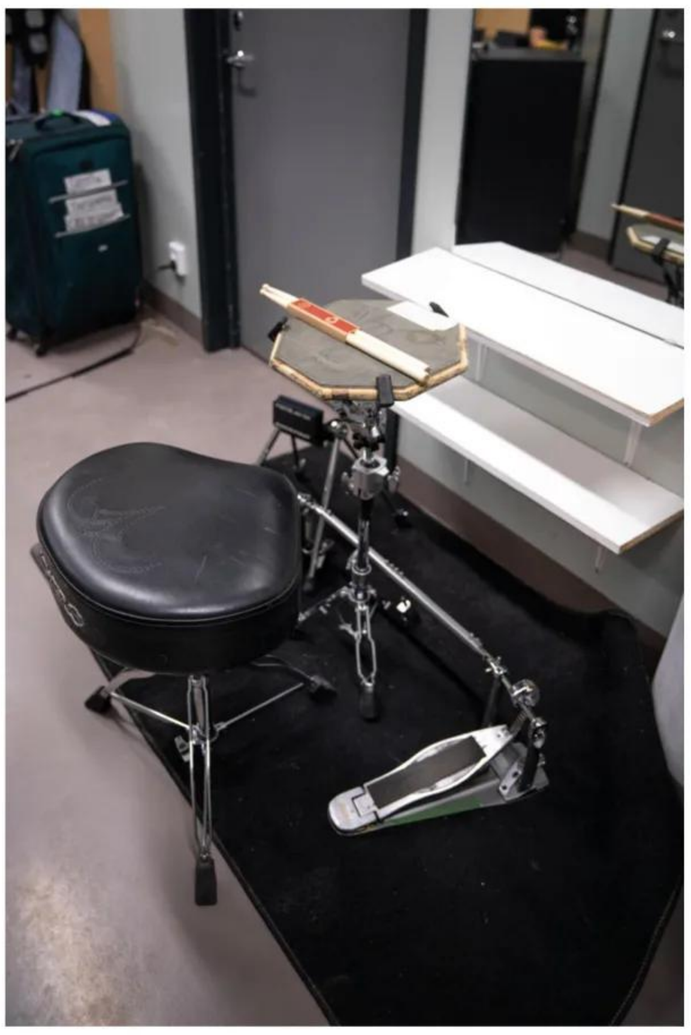
They arrived here yesterday via ferry from the Swedish mainland. This is a scaled-down operation by their standards: just the three articulated trucks and two tour buses carrying the band, their equipment and their stage set. The crew for their upcoming UK shows and the European arena tour that follows currently numbers 141, including drivers, caterers and the people who take care of the laundry.

Visby itself is a beautiful town. A cathedral whose origins date back to the 13th century looms over cobbled streets and charming old buildings. Crumbling fortifications and the ruins of churches offer glimpses of past glories and the fates that befell them. Still, the people who said that nothing happens in Visby in February weren't lying. Aside from the odd bar and restaurant, pretty much everything else is closed.

This the first time Joakim has been to the island, but Pär came here regularly as a teenager. Every summer, Visby holds one of the biggest medieval events in Europe, its population of 24,000 swelling to upwards of 100,000 for one epic week of fighting, jousting and drinking. The young Pär's interest in live action role-playing drew him to medieval re-enactment circles, which in turn brought him here as a teenager.



Neatly organised camouflage so it can be easily found (ho ho!)



"I came here for several years," he says, sitting on the tour bus a couple of hours before the show. "I didn't know anybody, I came over on the ferry on my own. There was so much going on. There were knights jousting in the moat next to the walls. It's a party island in the summer. I've spent more than a month of my life here, but I've never been sober before."

History and location aside, Visby is a typical stop-off on this tour. Eighty per cent of Sweden's population of 10 million lives in the lower third of a country that measures almost 1,000 miles from top to bottom but just 300 miles at its widest point. Most bands play Stockholm, Gothenburg, Malmö and maybe a couple of other medium-sized cities in the south and call it a tour.

This run of shows is the polar opposite of that. The idea was to bring the Sabaton show to people who might not otherwise be willing or able to travel see them. The first gig of this leg was in Övertorneå, a tiny town in the far north of the country on the border with Finland. The population of Övertorneå is 1,900, and 1,500 turned up to the gig. "Nothing has ever happened up there on that scale," says Pär. "It was lovely, we had the whole city backing us up."

This is actually the second leg of a similar, 30-date tour of off-the-beaten-track Swedish towns that Sabaton played in 2022. According to Pär, that original run was a direct response to being unable to tour internationally during the pandemic. They decided to do this second leg the day they played the final show of the first run.

"It was the best tour we've ever done," says the bassist, who lives in Cyprus for much of the year. "We did it after being locked in for so long. That last night was emotional, people were crying. I didn't want it to end."

By the time this second leg finishes, they'll have hit such second- and third-tier towns as Kiruna (pop. 20,000), Eskjö

Is it just us, or do Sabaton look odd in 'civilian' clothes?

"I'VE NEVER BEEN TO THIS ISLAND SOBER BEFORE"

PÄR SUNSTRÖM

(pop. 9,000) and Uddevalla (pop. 35,000). As the band's de facto manager, Pär took a hands-on approach, working with their booking agent on everything from routing the tour to booking the venues – something that keeps costs down, and also allows the band to retain control over what they do.

"It's a lot of work," he concedes. "But at the same time you get so much out of it. We've got no one telling us, 'No, you shouldn't play in this place or that place, you can't do this or that.' It's the way we've done things for our entire career."

Rock and metal bands can follow one of two career paths these days. The most familiar, and clichéd, path is to take the traditional swashbuckling approach, heavy on the sex'n'drugs'n'rock'n'roll, hoping charisma and the odd half-decent tune can magically translate into record sales, streams and YouTube views (spoiler: it rarely does).

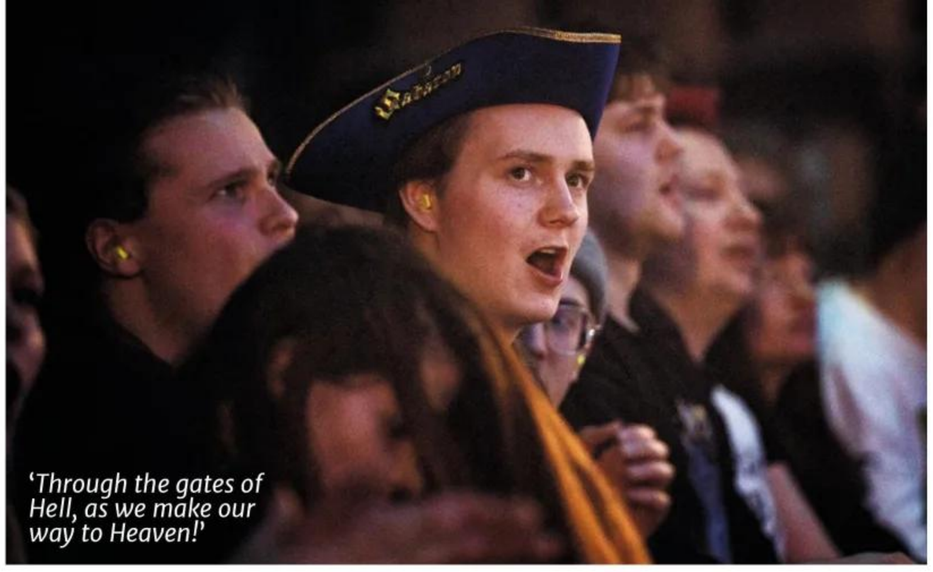
The other is to recognise the music business for what it is – i.e. a business – and approach it accordingly. In Sabaton's case, this has meant everything from teaming up with videogame company World Of Tanks to launching a range of band-branded of underpants. This way of doing things may lack rock'n'roll's traditional pirate glamour but, as Sabaton have proved, it's far more likely to result in a successful and sustained career (in fairness, it does help that they write epic tunes with the kick of a howitzer too).

This tour is part of that approach. It's hard to think of any other band who would spent several weeks schlepping around the backwaters of Sweden, but then Sabaton seem to relish challenges – and Pär Sundström especially. Like Gene Simmons in camo trousers, the bassist has essentially willed his band to success.

The most unlikely thing about Sabaton's upcoming UK tour isn't that Babymetal are supporting Sabaton in the UK – there's a long-standing mutual respect there, with the Swedes supporting their Japanese counterparts in Tokyo in 2018 and Joakim appearing on Babymetal's 2019 song *Oh! MAJINAI*. No, the most unlikely thing is that Sabaton are headlining multiple arenas in Britain in the first place. The idea of a power metal band playing such large venues in the UK would have been unthinkable in 2006, when they first toured the country as unknown openers on a three-band bill featuring Edguy and headliners Dragonforce.

"I'd never heard of them before we played with them the first time," says Dragonforce guitarist Herman Li, talking to *Hammer* from his adopted home of LA via Zoom. "The UK media wanted nothing to do with the kind of music we both played, but I could see they had something about them."

Sabaton (left to right): Tommy Johansson, Pär Sundström, Chris Rörland, Hannes Van Dahl and Joakim Brodén (front)



'Through the gates of Hell, as we make our way to Heaven!'

Pär unleashes his inner Steve Harris

Sabaton were never Mötley Crüe, though they had fun on the road. They'd guzzle vodka and Red Bull then wonder why they couldn't get to sleep. "We were in party mode, going out every night after the show, trying to find an afterparty with the fans," says Pär.

There were moments of drunken foolishness, naturally, like the time Joakim and Pär crashed on a fan's couch after getting turned away from a party in a hotel after a gig in Glasgow. As if it wasn't bad enough waking up the next day to a row between the fan and his wife, who wanted to know who the hell these hairy Swedes were and why they were sleeping on her floor, they realised that their bus had left for the next gig in Inverness without them. Cue a wallet-emptying £280 cab ride to ensure they made the show on time.

For musicians as ambitious as Sabaton were even back then, that kind of behaviour simply wasn't sustainable. "There's nothing wrong with having a great party after every gig when you do 15 shows a year, but all of a sudden you find yourself doing 170 shows in 12 months, and it's not so smart anymore," explains Joakim. The tipping point for the singer came during a gig in the late 2000s. "I was super-hungover and I was puking between the songs," he says. "That was when I thought, 'No, I can't do this anymore.'"

"I WAS PUKING BETWEEN SONGS"

JOAKIM BRODÉN

Even before that, Joakim and Pär had realised that the old rock'n'roll clichés weren't conducive to a career in the increasingly tough post-Napster world of 2000s metal.

"Even on that first tour, Pär had a laptop," says Herman Li, whose band toured with Sabaton for a second time in 2009. "I was pretty much managing Dragonforce, and we'd both spend all our time looking for somewhere we could plug in and get online. No other musicians apart from us were doing that at that point."

Some things haven't changed. Anyone stepping into Sabaton's dressing room at the ICA Maxi Arena today will be greeted by the sight of five men tapping away on their laptops. No one is vomiting in the corner or falling face-first into a pile of drugs; instead guitarist Chris Rörland ▶

SABATON X BABYMETAL

Ahead of touring together in Europe, frontman Joakim and bassist Pär fielded BM's questions

Su-metal: Joakim, you collaborated with us on the song *Oh! MAJINAI* [meaning 'magic' or 'spell']. What kind of spell would you like to cast on someone or something?
Joakim: "As an old Street Fighter, I'm gonna have to go with Hadouken!"

Su-metal: In Babymetal, we have a supreme being named the Fox God. If you were to fight him, what kind of method would you use? Or would you try to get him alone?
Joakim: "I would never dare to fight the Fox God. So I'll go with the old saying: If you can't beat them, join them."

Su-metal: What is in the tank that always appears on stage with you?
Joakim: "We actually have two tanks, Audie and Walther, named after soldiers we sing about on our [2014] album *Heroes*. The inside of the tanks are not very exciting, I'm afraid, but we have heard rumours of our crew hiding in there and eating candy from time to time, so who knows?"

Moametal: What is your favourite food? Do you happen to like sweets? What do you eat that makes you so strong?
Pär: "My favourite food is Swedish tacos. Perhaps you can try them when we tour together, since we do our own catering! Swedish tacos are inspired by Tex Mex but have become Swedenized and even tastier. I cannot say if it makes anyone strong, but it makes me happy! When it comes to sweets I do enjoy them also – sometimes too much."

Su-metal: I once read somewhere that you are interested in Japanese history. Joakim, If you visited Japan again, where would you like to visit?
Joakim: "Yes, very much so. I'd love to go back to Kyoto – I was there in 2015 – since I felt there was so much more to discover. It's an amazing city, and one day I'll go back and spend some serious time there."

Moametal: Do you like Babymetal?
Pär: "I do! When we toured in Japan with you guys, I did not miss a single show!"

Moametal: What made you first decide to play metal music?
Pär: "I liked metal music since my neighbour introduced me to Iron Maiden and my parents got me a guitar, but it was not until a few years later I really decided that I wanted to play metal myself. A guy approached me in school, and said that because I have long hair, I should be in a band. We became best friends and formed the first band I was in, called Mercator."

Su-metal: You have an amazing ability to really involve the audience at your live shows. How do you do it?
Joakim: "The audience is what makes it special for us every night, since we pretty much travel around with the same people, performing a similar set. The crowd in the hall is what is unique. But us playing the song *Primo Victoria* is a common occurrence!"

Moametal: My first impression of metal was scary and dangerous, but I've had the honour of meeting many legendary artists, including yourselves, and everyone is incredibly friendly. I consider you all as my uncles – is that OK?
Pär: "I think it is a lovely thought to become part of a big metal family, however we are also unfortunately aware that there are bad eggs everywhere. But generally heavy metal musicians and fans are quite good people. Just look at metal festivals and how little trouble there is there compared to festivals of some other genres."

Moametal: What Sabaton song would you recommend we listen to?
Pär: "It depends on your mood, but some songs that most people like are *The Attack Of The Dead Men*, *Dreadnought*, and also some older songs such as *To Hell And Back* and *Primo Victoria*!"

Pär loves it when a plan comes together

Joakim in a rare coat-wearing moment

is working on designs for new guitar picks. The vibe is less 'Bacchanalian rock'n'roll orgy', more 'slightly odd IT company who are a month behind on the office rent'.

Something stranger is happening a few doors down. Half a dozen people wearing assorted olde worlde costumes are sneaking into a small storage room. There's a woman dressed in a flowing peasant dress and a couple of guys in what look like handmade tunics. Someone else is in the regalia of a medieval Christian priest, replete with robes and crucifix. In the middle of them all is a man in a chair, having black warpaint applied to his face.

These are a bunch of local medieval re-enactors who have been roped in to spring a surprise on the support band, Hulkoff, by lining up behind them onstage and dancing at the conclusion of their set.

"It is a big deal that Sabaton are playing Visby," says one of the re-enactors. His name is Richard, and he's a big fan of the band. "It's weird that they've come here now, because no bands come here in the winter. But I'd say there are plenty of people here who will come to the gig who don't like metal but know Sabaton."

Much of Sabaton's popularity in their homeland stems from 2012's *Carolus Rex*, a concept album inspired by the 18th-century Swedish king Charles XII released in both English- and Swedish-language editions. The latter was novel enough to reach beyond the boundaries of the metal scene, ultimately ensuring a tour like this can happen now.

"In Sweden, there are enough people who aren't metalheads who would come to our shows, but I don't think there are too many countries like that," Joakim reasons. "Finland, maybe, but nowhere else. Not the UK."

Sabaton's high profile in their home country has its downsides. In January 2023, Swedish Sceptics Association, an organisation founded in the early 80s and dedicated to promoting the veracity of scientific research, announced that they were honouring Sabaton with their Enlightener Of The Year award in recognition of the band "[combining] its artistic work with public education" – a reference to the factual accuracy of their lyrics and videos.

Yet within days the organisation announced that the award was being "reviewed". It transpired that they had been made aware of an interview Pär had given after playing Crimea in 2015, in the wake of Russia's annexation of the Ukrainian peninsula. "If you go to [Crimean city] Sevastopol, you hardly feel they feel occupied," the bassist told *Sweden Rock* magazine in 2016, adding, "All these years they've felt like Russians but treated like a small piece of Ukraine."

Unsurprisingly given recent events, this unearthed quote caused a media furore, prompting Pär to issue a statement saying that his original quotes were referring to "how I experienced the situation there and then", adding, "That someone invades or occupies another country is against international law."

It was a clear response, but one that could have gone further in condemning Vladimir Putin's illegal occupation of the country. This may be coloured by the fact that Sabaton have a sizable Russian following. "Yeah, we have a lot of fans in Russia," says Pär now. "But we have a lot of fans in Ukraine too, and I can see from Spotify they are listening to our songs while their country is at war. I have friends on both sides, fans who are being called up to fight. A lot of fans [in Ukraine] have asked us to write about this battle."

And will you?

"Not now. It's a current event, we don't write about active politics. Maybe in the future, but now not now. It's extremely heavy."

The Swedish Sceptics Association completed their review and decided to stick to their original plan and give the band

The best February night out Visby has had in a long time!

their award. "When the media in Sweden write about Sabaton, they get shitloads of traffic," says Pär. "Five guys singing about war, wearing camouflage, it was the perfect thing to write about. It's a storm in a teacup."

Sabaton have a warehouse containing all their old stage props. This includes their very first stage set, a riser with ramps, pillars, ladders and room for drums and keyboards that they bought from a long-forgotten Swedish band and was used for three shows and the video for 2009's single *40:1*. "It looked huge when we got it," says Joakim. "Today, it's like, 'OK, not so big.'"

"UKRAINIAN FANS WANT US TO WRITE ABOUT THE WAR"

PÄR SUNDSTRÖM

Their most famous prop is the two-ton tank that's been used as a riser used by drummer Hannes Van Dahl since 2015. There are actually two tanks, nicknamed Walther and Audie – the former after German WWII General Walther Wenck, the latter after decorated US soldier-turned-Hollywood actor Audie Murphy, subjects of the Sabaton songs *Hearts Of Iron* and *To Hell And Back* respectively. Two tank risers may seem like overkill to some, but it enables the band to send one ahead to the next gig in classic military fashion.

The tank(s) will naturally be part of their upcoming arena shows, but Pär and Joakim are cagey about what else the gigs involve. The bassist dangles the words "theatrics" and "drama". "We want to bring in a bit of real acting," he says. "We want to bring in real humans to the show to illustrate the subjects of the songs a bit more."

There's no tank here in the ICA Maxi Arena and certainly no actors hamming it up, just museum-style figures dressed in the livery of Caroleans – 17th- and 18th-century Swedish soldiers – dotted between the pillars that circle the stage and Sabaton themselves. This is a scaled-down performance by Sabaton standards. "It doesn't make sense financially to bring all that stuff on this tour," says Joakim. "But we're giving people a different kind of Sabaton show."

The 2,000-odd Gotlanders here tonight don't seem to miss the heavy ordnance onstage. The arrival of a band whose last four albums all reached No.1 in the Swedish charts is a big deal. "The last band I saw play here was Europe about 10 years ago," an audience member named Anna tells *Hammer*. Her sparkly high street top and high-heeled boots would put her in a very small minority at a regular Sabaton gig, but the crowd here is split 60-40 between people who look like metal fans and people who don't. "I knew the name ▶

Another town conquered!

Visby faces *The Attack Of The Dead Men*

"WE COULD COLLABORATE WITH BABYMETAL"

PÄR SUNDSTRÖM

Sabaton, but I'm not that familiar with their music. He likes them, though," she adds, gesturing to her boyfriend, whose Sabaton-branded tricorn hat suggests he's very much in the metal-loving 60% of this audience.

The presentation may be stripped down, but anthems such as *The Lion From The North*, *The Red Baron* and *Bismarck* remain as brilliant and bombastic as always, even if half a dozen songs and all of Joakim's between-song banter is delivered in Swedish and goes over our heads. Still, their gig, their rules.

An hour after the show, the arena has emptied and Sabaton's crew are packing up their gear. The band themselves are in various states of undress backstage, the prospect of a 6am alarm call to catch the ferry back to the mainland hanging over them. There are three more weeks of this tour left before it winds up in the city of Lund, a bustling metropolis of 90,000 people. "And then there'll be no more places left for us to play in Sweden," booms Joakim, only half joking.

And after that? There's one more standalone single scheduled around the UK tour in April (Joakim and Pär refuse to say what it's called, though the singer says it will "surprise people"), plus a movie (they're equally tight-lipped about details for this). The follow-up to 2109's *The Great War* and its 2022 companion, *The War To End All Wars*, is a way off yet, but it's unlikely to complete a World War I-themed trilogy of albums. "I'd be surprised if we never touched WWI again, but I'd also be very surprised if our next album was another WWI album," says Joakim.

And what of a potential collaboration with their soon-to-be touring partners Babymetal? It's a rare moment where Joakim and Pär don't present a united front. "Musically, it would be hard because of what we do and what they do," says Joakim.

"It can be done, definitely," counters his bandmate, "we just need to find the right time."

All of that's in the future. Gotland has been taken, but there are more far-flung towns to conquer, more audiences to pound into submission, and anyway, those tanks won't roll themselves out of storage. It's all quiet on the Baltic front right now, but that peace won't last.

SABATON'S TRILOGY OF EPS, *WEAPONS OF THE MODERN AGE*, *HEROES OF THE GREAT* WAR AND *STORIES FROM THE WESTERN FRONT*, ARE OUT NOW VIA NUCLEAR BLAST RECORDS

FIVE MINUTES WITH JUSTINE JONES EMPLOYED TO SERVE

Their screamer-in-chief talks record labels, TikTok and playing massive arenas

WORDS: PARIS FAWCETT

There's a two-year gap between every Employed To Serve album. Now it's been two years since *Conquering*, so can we expect album five soon?
"No, we're just going to be doing singles at the moment. 2023 is about making up for lost time with touring. I feel like we haven't played most of the new material live yet, and since *Eternal Forward Motion* came out nine months before Covid, we've had two albums affected by it. We just want to get some mileage out of them and hit some places we've never toured before. So, we might write an album but it's not our main focus."

Both *Conquering* and *Eternal Forward Motion* were massive arena metal records. What's it like finally getting to perform this material in big venues with Gojira?
"It's amazing! It's awesome to see how people react to songs that have opportunity for crowd interaction. You've got the 'HEY!s' going on, you've got people with their kids in battle jackets going mental. It's wild, you can actually hear people breathing before you go onstage and you see so many people you can't make out their faces, they're like pebbles."

What have been your standout moments from being back on the road?
"At Roskilde, we bumped into Post Malone, which was fun. He's lovely. Annoyingly, he invited us to play beer pong with him but we were playing and I didn't want to get too drunk. And then I missed out on that photo of Dua Lipa and Turnstile [playing with him]. It was one of my biggest regrets not getting drunk before playing. We're too fucking professional!"

In 2020, you launched Church Road Records with your bandmate and husband Sammy Urwin. What was it like doing that alongside a pandemic and changing Brexit regulations?
"Everything that could go wrong and could have changed, changed during the pandemic. People have no money, there's all these stupid Brexit regulations, including on the band's side as well. Everything's expensive, everything's hard to get hold of. And with Royal Mail strikes and train strikes, you wonder if the records are going to get to fans and you worry if fans are gonna come to shows. You've just got to laugh at this point."

How have you adapted your business plan as things change?
"We've definitely had to work smart. We've had to take our stock back in house to save money, but that's worked really well. I think the more DIY you can be at the moment, the better. Go back to printing zines at home. It's that kind of proper recession, DIY, photocopier and a seven-inch sleeve era."

What record labels do you model Church Road on?
"Deathwish, 2012 era. That's what got me into this kind of music. You had Code Orange, Touché Amoré, Loma Prieta, Punch, Rise and Fall, Deafheaven and loads of Converge reissues. I was 19, maybe 20. I didn't go out to pubs as much and I had expendable income. I'd save up and get a huge order from Deathwish US every couple of months – it was sick!"

Last year, you and Sammy jumped on the TikTok train. What's the creative process behind your videos?
"I love TikTok. Me and Sammy just have random ideas in our heads and then we execute them. We try to be quick: when you're doing things that are supposed to be funny, you start overthinking, whereas if you surrender to it, and even if you're a bit cringe – which we are – you just commit. We try to have fun with it because it's a necessary evil, especially with running a label."

You read a lot of metal autobiographies during the pandemic. Which were your favourites?
"I really like the Ozzy one – I loved the bit where he thought he killed the priest. And of course, *Heavy Tales* by Jon Zazula, which I loved because it's from a record label perspective. It's about Jon and his wife starting Megaforce records and releasing Anthrax, and Metallica before they signed for Elektra. The Rex Brown one was also good. It's cool hearing about Pantera from a non-big character."

PRESS/ANDY FORD

"POST MALONE INVITED US TO PLAY BEER PONG WITH HIM"

***ETERNAL FORWARD MOTION* IS OUT NOW VIA SPINEFARM. A NEW EMPLOYED TO SERVE ALBUM IS EXPECTED...EVENTUALLY**

THE BLACKER ALBUM

Written during the pandemic and anchored by some of James Hetfield's darkest lyrics, *72 Seasons* saw Metallica clawing for a way out of the shadows. We found out if they made it

WORDS: DAVE EVERLEY • PICTURES: TIM SACCENTI

The day Metallica dropped *Lux Æterna*, Lars Ulrich couldn't help himself. He had to look at what people were saying about it online.

His curiosity was understandable. Released with zero warning on November 28, 2022, *Lux Æterna* was the first brand new Metallica song in six years, and a taster for their upcoming 11th album, *72 Seasons*. Big news by any measure, and Lars knew people would have opinions on it because everybody has an opinion on everything Metallica ever do. And they're not always positive.

"If you decide to go down into the comment sections, at least for me, you have to prepare yourself for not taking any of it overly personally," says Lars today. "You have to kind of remove yourself from it. But I'd like to challenge anybody in a band to say they don't look at comments."

And so the co-founder and drummer of the world's biggest metal band braced himself for a look into the bear-pit that is the internet to see what people thought of the song.

"I mean, I'm not sitting up until four o'clock in the morning scrolling through every one," he says. "But when you haven't put any music out in five or six years and you dump something like *Lux Æterna* on an unsuspecting world, you're going to want to see what the feedback is."

As it turned out, that feedback was largely positive and rightly so. *Lux Æterna* was three-and-a-half minutes of joyous exhilaration, a world away from the knotty complexity of 2008's *Death Magnetic* and the extended power-flex of 2016's *Hardwired... To Self-Destruct*. That it seemed to be a throwback to their debut album, *Kill 'Em All*, or even the earlier New Wave Of British Heavy Metal movement, only stacked things further in its favour (this is a comparison Lars has issues with, but more on that later).

"RECORDING GAVE US A PURPOSE IN LOCKDOWN"

LARS ULRICH

Two more defiantly forward-facing singles have followed since then: the raging *Screaming Suicide* and the self-lacerating *If Darkness Had A Son*. The gleaming, perfectly tuned Metallica machine, which in the last couple of years has been idling in the background while the band themselves focused on writing, recording and generally dealing with a global pandemic, is roaring into life. Except the Metallica machine maybe isn't quite as gleaming or perfectly tuned as you'd imagine.

"We're fumbling along trying to figure out how to do things the best we can, just like everybody else," says Lars with a laugh. "We're sitting around on Zoom calls going, 'Uh, how do we do this, how do we do that?' Metallica is just as gaffer-taped and jerry-rigged and clusterfucked as everything else."

It's a late February evening when Lars calls *Metal Hammer*. This is only the second interview he's done for the new album at this point, and he's still getting his head around the idea of what he's talking about. "I don't know what's fucking up, down or sideways, to be honest with you," he says breezily.

James Hetfield: comfortable enough to open up to his bandmates

When Robert Trujillo calls a few days later, he's in pretty much the same boat. Metallica's bassist of 20 years admits he didn't even know that *Lux Æterna* was dropping when it did.

"I started getting texts the next morning from friends: 'Wow, the new song's amazing, the video's awesome,'" he says. "I didn't even know that the song was coming out. So maybe the success of keeping it a secret is some of the members not knowing."

No one has to keep it a secret anymore. *72 Seasons* finally arrives on April 14. Contrary to expectations raised by *Lux Æterna*, not to mention frontman James Hetfield's assertion that the album's title is a reference to how the experiences of childhood shape adulthood, it's no nostalgia trip. Instead, the 12-track album is a fearsome slab of metal that's both modern and timeless. Lyrically, at least, it's The Blacker Album: a 77-minute roar of torment, self-doubt, frustration, and, ultimately, hope.

"WE'RE NOT TRYING TO PRETEND WE'RE 20, 30 OR EVEN 40"

LARS ULRICH

This isn't the first Metallica album to be recorded in dramatic circumstances – *...And Justice For All*, *The Black Album* and especially *St. Anger* all had their share of tumult. But *72 Seasons* was made against a testing backdrop, not least a global pandemic. It's become a cliché to talk about 'lockdown albums', but that's exactly what *72 Seasons* is – albeit the biggest lockdown album of them all, a potential full-stop on an era that's hopefully vanishing in the rearview mirror.

"Recording gave us a purpose in lockdown," says Lars. "It was also a way to feel as though we were communicating with each other, and staying in touch, and trying to find some light in the dark. Feeling you could turn the energy and despair of those couple of years into something positive."

It's tempting to assume that bands start thinking about a new album as soon as the last one is sent out into the world, but that's not how Metallica work. Their creative process is long and meticulous, not so much a mad torrent of artistic energy as a series of randomly shaped pieces being constantly rearranged until they fit.

Each new creative cycle begins with Lars "riff-mining" through hundreds of digital recordings amassed of the band jamming in soundchecks and in the Tuning Room that's set up backstage at every gig. Ideas are funnelled into an A-list or B-list, or given five, four or three stars. There's no grand plan at this stage, no vision of how it will all shape up and fit together.

"I wish I could romanticise it, and tell you that we're sitting down and there's a destination, but it's basically just work," says Lars. "You write one song, then you write another song and eventually you've got an album."

Except there was one massive complicating factor this time around: Covid-19. Metallica hadn't even begun work on the new album when the pandemic hit and most of America went into lockdown, torching whatever plans they did have.

"We've lived decades upon decades of having schedules: 'OK, we're on tour for a month, we're doing this in six months, we're going in the studio in eight months,'" says Lars. "When you have the uncertainty of not knowing what any of it looks like, it takes your confidence away."

Kirk Hammett: 60 going on 26

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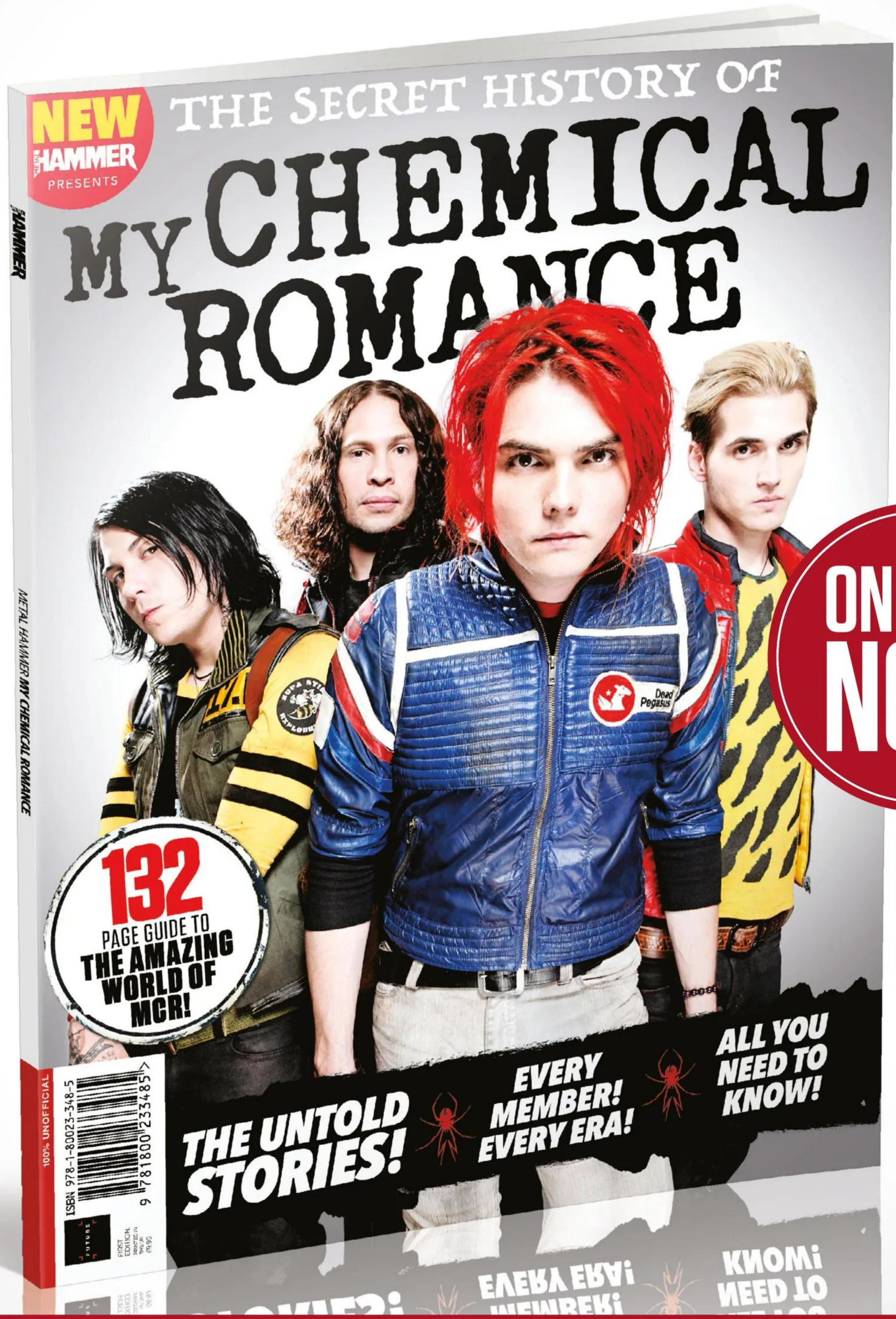

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Lars Ulrich: embracing the clusterfucks

Things became a little less uncertain in May 2020, when James brought an acoustic version of *...And Justice For All* opening track *Blackened* to the table for the band to flesh out remotely.

"That was really the start of something," says Robert. "It forced us to fire up our home studios and get the machine going. After that it was like, 'Do we want to do another acoustic number?' And we all said, 'No man, everybody else is doing acoustic covers of their songs, let's write some original stuff. Let's do this.'"

Like every other band in the same situation at that time, they initially muddled through as best they could, jamming remotely with producer Greg Fidelman overseeing things. "Sitting in three different places on Zoom calls, trying to figure out what button to press and how shit works," as Lars puts it.

This went on for a few months. "I believe that challenge being presented to us helped spark that creative flame and create that hunger and desire to create," says Robert.

Lars is less diplomatic. "It was all a bit of a clusterfuck," he says cheerfully.

Things began to untangle themselves in November 2020 when the band convened at Metallica HQ in San Rafael for a livestreamed acoustic benefit show for their All Within My Hands foundation. It was the first time they had all been together since the start of the pandemic, and it gave them the opportunity to start playing the new songs in the same room.

"It's kind of funny, I saw some footage of that the other day – we all had masks on," says Lars. "It's definitely a lockdown record in that sense."

With restrictions easing, work proceeded cautiously but steadily. They took Covid seriously – especially the prospect of 'long Covid'. "You hear about this horrible thing where it affects your lung capacity for the next 10 years, so we treated it with the respect it deserved," says Lars. "Testing 37 times a day."

"I HAVE DAYS WHERE I FEEL LIKE A FUCKING IDIOT"

LARS ULRICH

Counter-intuitively, not being able to step out of the studio for any length of time wasn't helpful. Metallica have traditionally broken up recording sessions with bouts of touring or festival appearances to pull them away from the grind of "fucking sitting there with 17 different versions of some connecting bridge out of the third guitar solo" and give themselves perspective and focus.

"In my 20s and 30s, I was just so fucking instinctive and right," says Lars. "Everything we did, we never made bad decisions. Now, there's 10 different ways of doing everything. As your experiences increase, so do the options: "Hey, that's a great riff. What happens if it's a little slower? What happens if we change the key?' All of sudden you've got seven fucking versions of this riff, and you sit and spend a day on which one's better.

"When we're making *Ride The Lightning* and we've got to be out of the studio on Friday 28th, there's no option to record on the 29th, because you don't have the money," he continues. "So the record's done on the 28th. Nowadays, what are they going to do?" He laughs. "Throw us out of our own studio?"

Of course no one threw Metallica out of their own studio. Instead, they inched towards completing *72 Seasons*, finally wrapping it in late 2022.

"Making a record is just making 12,247 decisions in the space of 18 months, and you hope you've made more right ones than wrong ones," says Lars. "And even then, you won't know for sure for another few years because you're still high on the process."

One of the biggest frustrations Lars Ulrich has with himself these days is the amount of "future-tripping" he does. "I spend more time in the future than I do paying attention to my surroundings: 'What're we gonna do in 2026?' or whatever. I need to spend more time in the fucking moment."

The one place Lars doesn't spend a lot of time is in the past. Aside from the occasional necessity – listening back to a big reissue, say, or rehearsing old songs they haven't played in years – he's not given to nostalgia. This is why the reaction that greeted *Lux Æterna* – specifically that it sounded like a throwback to *Kill 'Em All* or the New Wave Of British Heavy Metal – niggles at him a little bit, despite his protestations that it doesn't.

"If you think that, there's absolutely nothing that I'm gonna do to talk you out of that," he says. "Please don't misunderstand or turn it into 'Lars Ulrich is pissed off at the comments', 'cos it's not that at all. It's just more this thing about the continuous referencing to other elements of either our own past or somebody else's past. I guess to me the most important thing is whether people like it or not. All that other stuff, I can't wrap my head around that so much."

Retro or not, *Lux Æterna* is one of the few consciously uplifting moments on *72 Seasons*. *'Anticipation in domination / A sea of hearts beat as one, unified,'* sings James at the song's start, evoking the celebratory, communal feel of old-school Metallica anthems *Hit The Lights*, *Metal Militia* and *Whiplash*. *'Never alone for the feelings alike.'*

It's not clear exactly what the inspirations for James's lyrics are, because at the time of writing this, he isn't doing any interviews for *72 Seasons*. This may be down to timing, or it may be a reluctance to rake over recent events in his personal life, including his return to rehab in 2019 and the announcement in 2022 that he was divorcing his wife of 25 years, Francesca, or older traumas such as his Christian Scientist upbringing and loss of his mother when he was 16.

It's not clear how much of *72 Seasons* is autobiographical, but it is apparent that the singer has reached deep inside himself when it comes to his lyrics. The band have said that *Screaming Suicide* "addresses the taboo subject of suicide," reframing teenage anguish through middle-aged eyes. Elsewhere, it sounds like he's drawing on his own experiences for *Chasing Light* (*'All the love a young one needs / Thoughtless elders destroyed'*), while *If Darkness Had A Son* sees him barking: *'Temptation leave me be!'* All this blackness makes the light, when it does come, shine doubly bright. *'Misery / She's not what I'm living for, no no!'* sings James at the conclusion of 11-minute closing track *Inamorata*, a flash of optimism and hope that turns everything that had come before on its head.

Lars says he isn't sure how many of the lyrics on *72 Seasons* predate James's recent personal issues. "But all the lyrics I've seen are new. It's not like song number seven is something left over from the *Hardwired...* album. Whether they were written five years ago or 10 years ago, I've never seen them before this record."

What do you hear when you listen to James sing these lyrics? He pauses to think.

"Vulnerability. Transparency. Acceptance and hope. Possibility. Redemption. I feel that they're very daring, I love the vulnerability, I love the fact that he's comfortable

"IT'S ABOUT MUSIC MOVING YOU"

Your guide to every track on *72 Seasons*

1. 72 SEASONS

The title track is a classic Metallica album opener: machine-gun drums, jagged riffs, James Hetfield spitting out terse, staccato stanzas. A relentless, thrashy song punctuated by bursts of melodies and a pair of killer solos, it's the charred objects on the album's cover brought to life.
Key lyric: *'Wrath of man / Thrive upon / Feeding on / 72 seasons gone'*

2. SHADOWS FOLLOW

James's howl fights against an insistent, serrated-knife riff as he filters youthful anguish through a 59-year-old mind, leaning heavily on tried-and-trusted wolf imagery in the process.
Key lyric: *'On I run, still my shadows follow'*

3. SCREAMING SUICIDE

Kirk's big, loping wah-wah introduces the album's second single, before James spits out his taboo-busting lyrics, articulating the emotions surrounding a sensitive subject without glorifying or sensationalising it.
Key lyric: *'Keep me inside / My name is suicide'*

4. SLEEPWALK MY LIFE AWAY

A jabbing bassline and a scything riff usher in a real-life-waking-nightmare lyric. With its mid-paced groove, epic chorus and dense gravitational field, it really wouldn't have sounded out of place on *The Black Album*.
Key lyric: *'Take a deep waking breath / Hope the blood arrives'*

5. YOU MUST BURN!

A hulking, heavy-duty rhythm propels a song that uses a witch trial as a metaphor for adolescent rebellion and the death of innocence.
Key lyric: *'Question yourself, you may learn / You are the witch, you must burn'*

6. LUX ÆTERNA

"A song about celebration, about good energy, about togetherness, about music moving you," is how Lars Ulrich describes the album's NWOBHM-echoing first single. Undeniably uplifting, and as such an outlier here.
Key lyric: *'Amplification lightning the nation / Never alive more than right here tonight'*

7. CROWN OF BARBED WIRE

More externalised angst, with James painting a vivid picture of a broken king surveying his ruined kingdom – adolescent torment set to awkward, thorny music.
Key lyric: *'This rusted empire I own / Bleed as I rust on this throne'*

8. CHASING LIGHT

Lars Ulrich's drumming leads much of *72 Seasons*, and nowhere more so than here. The call-and-response chorus features Robert Trujillo singing on a Metallica studio album for the first time.
Key lyric: *'Catch your fall / Lean on me / End it all / Lean on me'*

9. IF DARKNESS HAD A SON

With allusions to temptation, it's hard not to view this as James addressing his demons. Maybe, maybe not – but its relentless groove and Lars's restless drum barrage is inarguable.
Key lyric: *'If darkness had a son, here am I'*

10. TOO FAR GONE?

72 Seasons doesn't give up its melodic treasures easily, and one of its most memorable is buried in here, the album's second shortest song (4:34, if you're interested). *Too Far Gone?* has a sudden shift of gear that's disorientating but entirely welcome.
Key lyric: *'Am I too far gone to save? / Help me make it through the day'*

11. ROOM OF MIRRORS

There are echoes of *Disposable Heroes'* *'You will die when I say, you must die'* hook in the penultimate song's turbo-charged chug, and James sings *'broken, beat and scarred'* at one point, referencing the *Death Magnetic* track, though musically and lyrically it reflects the album's multiplicity of emotions.
Key lyric: *'Strip away the phantom fame / Exposing all the sides to see / The good and bad in me'*

12. INAMORATA

Inamorata is the album's 11-minute closing track: a brooding epic that unexpectedly breaks down halfway through and builds all the way back. After the emotional wringer of what came before, the song and album end on a much-needed glimmer of light.
Key lyric: *'Misery / She's not what I'm living for'*

sharing that side of what's in his head and what's coming out is very relatable for all of us. The lyrics all come from James, but we're all in a place in our lives where we're much more comfortable with who we are as people, and sharing and showing who we are. Not trying to pretend we're 20 years old or 30 years old or even 40 years old."

The perfect snapshot of the band Metallica are now versus the band they used to be – or at least the perception of the band they used to be – came midway through a gig in Belo Horizonte, Brazil in 2022. Addressing the crowd, James confessed to "feeling a little bit insecure, like I'm an old guy, can't play anymore". He revealed that his bandmates rallied around him backstage, giving him a hug and telling him they had his back if he was struggling.

"WE HAD A HUNGER AND DESIRE TO CREATE"

ROB TRUJILLO

At the end of this impromptu speech, Lars, Robert and Kirk congregated around the singer to give him another, more public group hug. When they were done, James addressed the crowd again: "I am not alone, and neither are you." It was an unexpected moment of vulnerability and emotion from a band not known for overt displays of either.

"There are times when you're not as comfortable being vulnerable and showing your insecurities, and all these things make you put on a harder shell," says Lars. "But certainly in our current frame of mind, we're very comfortable with things like that. We love each other and we respect each other and we admire each other."

Are you able to sit down with James and go, "Listen, I'm worried about you", or "I've been divorced, this is what it feels like to go through it"?

"We have those conversations using different words. But yes, we talk about stuff like that."

How's James doing now?

"He's doing great. Like all of us… Do I have my own worries and insecurities? Of course. I have good days, as a bandmember, as a parent, as a life-partner, a song, a friend. Then I have other days where I feel like a fucking idiot or a loser or my head is not screwed on straight, I'm an asshole or whatever."

In November 2022, a couple of weeks before *Lux Æterna* was released, Metallica played a relatively small-scale gig at the Hard Rock Live in Hollywood, Florida. The show was in honour of their early mentor Jon Zazula, aka Jonny Z, the man who founded Megaforce Records expressly to release *Kill 'Em All* back in 1983, and his wife Marsha, both of whom died during lockdown. Fittingly, the set drew exclusively from the band's first two albums – a rare nostalgia trip for Metallica.

"That was a lot of fun, but it was also very tiring," says Robert Trujillo. "It's full on. We're not 21 years old. We took it on, we had a good time. Limbs were sore the next day, the necks needed adjusting."

The pendulum is about to swing in the other direction. On April 27, Metallica kick off the massive M72 tour in Amsterdam. The concept is unique: two shows in every city they stop off in, with completely different setlists on each night ("No repeats," insists Robert Trujillo proudly). While regular breaks ensure it won't be quite as intense as the epic tours of old, it will still take them through to September 2024 as it stands.

Rob Trujillo: no longer in the dark

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We cannot wait to see these guys back onstage

MOST. METAL. EVER.

Metallica have long been strict about doing soundtracks. So how did *Master Of Puppets* end up on *Stranger Things*?

Metallica used to have a blanket policy when it came to requests to use their music on TV and in movies. "We'd say no to everything," says Lars Ulrich. "Then a few years ago, we did a 180 – we basically said, 'Why are we not sharing our music? It should be out there. Stop being so fucking protective of it."

Since then, Metallica's songs have been heard in everything from TV show *Billions* to horror/comedy sequel *Zombieland: Double Tap*. But it was the inclusion of *Master Of Puppets* in season four of Netflix's *Stranger Things* that blew the doors wide open.

"*Stranger Things* was a cool show, we know about it from our kids, so when we got the opportunity, we said, 'Yeah, have at it'," says Lars. "And then it just became this cultural phenomenon."

The band had already seen how the show had propelled Kate Bush's 1985 single *Running Up That Hill* to viral success, but that didn't make the impact of *Master Of Puppets* – played in a climactic scene by beloved metalhead character Eddie Munson – any less surprising.

"It's a heavy metal song that's over eight minutes long, that was released in 1986," says Lars. "The fact that became a phenomenon in the summer of 2022 is pretty mind-blowing. It was totally unexpected to meet kids on the street and at gigs: 'Hi, I'm 10 years old and I saw you for the first time through *Stranger Things* and *Master Of Puppets*.'"

And what's next? More Metallica/TV and movie tie-ins? Maybe.

"Now we more or less say yes to everything," says Lars. "Within reason."

"I NEED TO SPEND MORE TIME IN THE MOMENT"

LARS ULRICH

"It seemed like a really good idea about a year ago," says Lars. "Now that we're getting close, there's part of it that's, like, 'Holy fuck, what did we just throw ourselves into?'" He says he's been putting in the hard yards in the gym: "I'm pretty much chained to my Peloton."

Neither Lars nor Robert will be drawn into details as to what the stage set will look like, beyond the fact that it will relocate the snake pit into the centre of the stadiums they're playing in, with all the engineering complexities that entails (where exactly do you hang a lighting rig from in a venue with no roof?). Similarly, they're keeping schtum about the setlist. "Will we play every song from this album?" says Robert evasively. "I hope so, at some point over the next few years."

This decision to scale things up rather than down is admirable given there are a couple of significant milestones on the horizon. In August, James Hetfield turns 60. Lars Ulrich hits the same age in December. Kirk Hammett reached that landmark last November.

"Surely there must be some mistake," says Lars drily. "When people turn 60, aren't they supposed to be old? I don't feel very old. I feel in some perverse way younger and more clueless than ever. But it is what it is. I'm accepting of the things you can't change."

He has an equally unconcerned response to the question of how long Metallica can carry on doing this at the level they do it.

"How long is a piece of string? If I keep sitting on that Peloton and everybody else stays in good shape, then knock on wood, hopefully a few years still. Look at the Stones. Look at McCartney."

And the chance of the gaps between albums becoming shorter?

"I don't know how possible it would be to make an album in a shorter amount of time."

Of course, this is Metallica, and no other band has as many hopes, desires and demands projected on them by its fans. And no one is as aware of this as Lars Ulrich.

"We do take it seriously and we do try to do the best we can," he says. "But as we get older, it doesn't feel like we're any closer to cracking the code on any of it than we were 10 years ago or 20 years ago or 30 years ago. I mean, you can romanticise about having to finish an album on the 28th of the month because you're about to run out of money, especially if you're sitting freaking the fuck out and trying to figure out what's up, down and sideways, but I guess at the end of the day, I wouldn't change a thing."

And so the Metallica machine moves ever forwards, as gaffer-taped and jerry-rigged and clusterfucked as it ever was.

72 *SEASONS* IS OUT NOW VIA METALLICA'S OWN LABEL, BLACKENED RECORDINGS. KEEP AN EYE ON WWW.METALHAMMER.COM FOR MORE

FIVE MINUTES WITH NE OBLIVISCARIS

The Australian prog metal maverick talks bushfires, snake attacks and being boycotted by elitists

WORDS: MATT MILLS

Your singer and violinist, Tim Charles, has said that the pandemic "came close to breaking [Ne Obliviscaris] completely". Why?
"Everyone had their own individual problems to deal with. Tim went through an awful lot with deaths in the family right in the middle of him writing his parts [for latest album *Exul*]. The drums were recorded in March 2020. The album had to be recorded across a number of years in nine different studios. When things are delayed that long, frustration seeps in. People didn't know whether the band was still happening because there had been such delays."

How did you make it through?
"What saved the band was having Patreon: we're forever grateful for being supported by such wonderful people, who helped us move forward despite going through hard times as well."

Ne Obliviscaris were one of the first metal bands to use Patreon, and now loads of bands do it. How do you feel about that?
"When we started ours in 2016, we knew we'd get heckled a bit for it. But I feel that Australian bands are at a disadvantage: if we were based in Europe, we'd probably be bigger because we'd be touring a lot more. And we did get a lot of hate mail."

Saying what?
"It was primarily people who didn't understand it and thought we were begging for money. There's a difference between begging for money and people paying and receiving something in return, like behind-the-scenes things and interviews. It's a subscription service. It was frustrating, but we've never cared about what people think too much. In the early days, when we were announced as the support for Suffocation, we received threats."

Why were you getting threats over a gig?!
"Because we weren't metal enough. At some death metal gigs just prior to this show happening, these people made some flyers that were handed out at the shows, getting people to boycott us for being a main support for Suffocation. They said, 'Violins have no place in metal,' and went on homophobic rants. It was completely ridiculous. At the end of the day, we ended up playing the show and didn't get as much as one heckler, which says a lot about the people that were threatening us."

"WE'VE RECEIVED THREATS FOR NOT BEING METAL ENOUGH"

***Equus*, the lead single of new album *Exul*, is about the Australian bushfires of 2019 and 2020. How were you affected by what happened?**
"I wasn't affected physically, but you could see the smoke from where I live [in Melbourne]. For quite a long time, there was a haze across the city because the bushfires were so immense. I'm more of an animal person than a people person, so what got to me was seeing pictures of animals trapped against fences because they couldn't escape. They'd be scorched against the fence, like a warzone. I know some people that had to leave where they were living because they'd lost houses. There was this second-hand sense of loss, almost: feeling loss for that person that's lost everything."

It must be interesting being an animal person in Australia, considering most of those animals can kill you…
"I haven't had too many close calls with dangerous animals in Australia, but I actually grew up in Papua New Guinea. They've got their own problems with crocodiles and snakes. I remember walking along these jungle tracks with my family and standing on a Papuan black, which is one of the most venomous snakes in the world. Animals are only really dangerous if they feel threatened. When a shark attacks once in a while, people will decide they want to go out and hunt the shark, when we're the ones who've gone out into their waters and got bitten. It seems ridiculous to me."

What ended up happening with that Papuan snake?
"I completely shat myself and we all ran off! Ha ha! For the most part, you'll only come across snakes when they're sunning themselves or hungry. If you step on a snake and it's in the sun and relaxed, there's generally a delay, so you have a bit of time while the snake's confused."

NE OBLIVISCARIS' LATEST STUDIO ALBUM *EXUL* IS OUT NOW VIA SEASON OF MIST.

PRESS

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS

"HYBRID WASN'T AN

After the runaway success of 2000's *Hybrid Theory*, Linkin Park had something to prove.

THEORY OF A DEAD ACCIDENT"

PRESS/JAMES MINCHIN II

Could *Meteora* live up to the hype of the most successful debut of the 21st century?

Hybrid Theory was a genre-defining juggernaut. Released in 2000, Linkin Park's debut album was a jagged blend of metal, hip hop, electronica and irresistible pop choruses, which pushed nu metal to a new mainstream level. The following year, it became the best-selling album in the United States.

By the time the Cali six-piece started creating its follow-up, *Meteora*, the hype around them was at an all-time high. Recorded at a time when online piracy had started putting the shitters up the music industry, protecting the record became top priority for the band's label, Warner.

"We had 16 boxes of giant reel tape that we had to take to New York, to go mix the record, on a plane with two security guards," says Rob McDermott, who managed the band from 2000 to 2010 and was tasked with devising an over-the-top strategy to keep the music secret.

Security measures continued as *Meteora*'s release date approached, and journalists invited to an exclusive pre-release listening party were asked to give up their phones on arrival. Luckily for Linkin Park's team, the plans worked.

Speaking to us over Zoom from his home in LA, Rob motions to the shimmering plaques on the wall behind him, including a *Hybrid Theory* diamond award representing 10 million sales. "Warner made those just internally," he continues, "because we were able to ship four million records around the world without a leak."

Hybrid Theory might have put Linkin Park on the map, but *Meteora* proved they were here to stay. Released at a time when the star power of nu metal was beginning to wane, it ushered in a bigger, more polished, anthemic sound, purpose-built for stadiums and festival fields, and produced ubiquitous blockbusters such as *Numb* and *Somewhere I Belong*.

"In places in Asia, we started getting to the point where we couldn't leave our hotel without a planned itinerary and security," says bassist Dave 'Phoenix' Farrell, revealing the band's profile rose to uncomfortable levels during the *Meteora* touring cycle.

Recalling instances when the band were bundled into vans to escape mobs of fans, Dave says he used an alias every time he checked into a hotel. "If I want to go to Starbucks, I don't want it to be a big ordeal. Now I know how to navigate that a lot better, but with *Meteora*, we were just starting to come to terms with a lot of that. We were learning on the fly."

Linkin Park started piecing together the songs for *Meteora* during Ozzfest in summer 2001. Working in a makeshift studio at the back of their tour bus, spirits were high and creative juices flowed: at one point, the band had more than 80 songs in various states of realisation. By the time they headed into LA's NRG Studios in August 2002, where they had recorded *Hybrid Theory*, with returning producer Don Gilmore, they had whittled that down to 13 close-to-complete demos.

Constant interference from label Warner, who questioned everything from the band's line-up to their vision, had made the *Hybrid Theory* sessions feel fraught. Due to the album's success, they now stepped back, allowing the band to make the follow-up they wanted.

It didn't have the same fresh-out-the-box vigour as their debut, but *Meteora* is arguably a stronger set of songs – less angsty, deeper and more emotional. And while that's no doubt due to the band's growth as writers, *Meteora*'s ongoing ability to resonate is unmistakably down to late singer Chester Bennington who, despite being sick for five weeks and having to record his vocals alone while the rest of the album was being mixed, put in the strongest performance of his career.

Having struggled with addiction and depression from an early age, the turmoil in the singer's private life is laid bare in the powerful lyrics for tracks such as *Somewhere I Belong, Easier To Run* and *Numb*. The latter would go on to become nu metal's last true mega hit, passing over a billion streams on both Spotify and YouTube.

"I've learned over the years that really great vocalists can mimic many different things," says Dave. "Chester was that to a T. He could be a trumpet. He could sing like Barry White. He could mimic stuff with his voice, and, because of that, he had such an incredible range."

Meteora, Dave says, was the sound of the band realising what a potent weapon they had in their midst. "We were like kids in a candy store as we discovered more and more places that he could go vocally."

Meteora was released on March 25, 2003, to critical and commercial acclaim – although the general consensus was that Linkin Park had played it safe and turned in *Hybrid Theory* 2.0. Speaking in 2008, Chester agreed. "Within the band, we call *Hybrid Theory* and *Meteora* 'Volumes I and II'," he told *Kerrang!*'s Tom Bryant. "They're very similar in a lot of ways. There's almost a formula to them, you can tell what each song is going to do next."

However, *Meteora* didn't merely rehash past glories. "We wanted to further define and evolve our sound as well," rapper Mike Shinoda said. "A song like *Breaking The Habit*, for example, could never have existed on *Hybrid Theory*; it was a more mature song, lyrically and sonically."

To promote the album, alongside *five* massive singles, the band embarked on a tour lasting from February 2003 to September 2004. The gruelling cycle included their first-ever foray into stadiums, supporting Metallica on their 2003 Summer Sanitarium tour, alongside Limp Bizkit, Deftones and Mudvayne. It saw them take on the daunting task of playing to almost a million diehard Metallica fans over two and half months.

"WE COULDN'T LEAVE OUR HOTEL WITHOUT SECURITY"

DAVE FARRELL, BASSIST

The intensive schedule proved especially tough for Chester. Drink and drugs had started to take a toll on his relationship with his bandmates during promotion for *Hybrid Theory*, but by the end of the *Meteora* tour, he was in an even darker place.

"I wasn't leaving my house. I'd shack up in my closet in the dark and shake all day," he told Tom Bryant. "I'd wake up and have a pint of Jack Daniel's to calm down, then I'd pop a bunch of pills and go back in my closet and fucking freak out for the rest of the day. I was a mess. I was falling through windows, having seizures and going to hospital the whole time. It was fucking ridiculous. I was a total wreck."

"He'd talk about it later, but in the moment, you wouldn't notice it," says Rob McDermott of Chester's mindset at the time. "He left it all out on the stage. To me, that was his therapy. He was there. He was in that moment feeling the pain of everyone and himself."

If Chester was struggling with his mental health on the road, he hid it well, according to P.O.D.'s Sonny Sandoval, who supported Linkin Park on the North American leg of the

Chester Bennington had one helluva range

GETTY

Linkin Park performing with Jay-Z and Paul McCartney at the Grammys on February 8, 2006

Meteora tour in 2004. "He was a sweetheart," he remembers. "He had something about him that lit up the room."

Sonny describes the tour, which also featured Hoobastank and The Story So Far, as a real "family" affair. Each night, the bands would hang out in each other's dressing rooms, smoking shisha and drinking, while later Chester would invite everyone onstage together to perform the band's incendiary closer, *One Step Closer*. Those bonds of friendship were put to the test one night, however, when the bands and crew celebrated on the roof of a high-rise hotel.

"At one point, we all get excited, not even realising that we're so close to the edge," recalls Sonny, revealing his heart still races when he tells the story. "I picked up Chester and, not even realising and just having fun, he flings back. Literally, if he had fallen out of my arms, he would have fallen off this roof. But I had him so tight, and then he was just dangling there screaming, and I am panicking, freaking out. I told him, 'Bro, I could have dropped you.' And then he looked at me and said, 'You would never have dropped me.' And then he just gave me a big old hug."

"THE STAGE WAS CHESTER'S THERAPY"

ROB McDERMOTT, FORMER MANAGER

"The first time I met Paul, he showed up to a rehearsal and I was terrified," says Dave, who cites working with the Beatle as a career highlight. "I was terrified that he was going to be disgusted with my bass playing – why am I playing bass if Paul McCartney's here? That didn't make sense in my head. I don't think I slept the night before that first rehearsal, but it couldn't have been anything more the opposite."

Twenty years on, *Meteora* is rightly viewed as a modern classic, and has sold 27 million copies worldwide. In February, the band surprise-released *Lost*, a gloriously wistful, clenched-teeth track from the *Meteora* sessions that had been languishing on one of Mike Shinoda's hard drives. Originally left off the album because the band felt it was too similar to *Numb*, it sounds nostalgic yet fresh – a gift to the legions of fans who thought they'd never hear Chester's voice on a 'new' song again.

It's also a testament to how much gas was in the tank during Linkin Park's early days. Having reached a level in their career they could never have imagined, the band would take a left turn with their third album, 2007's *Minutes To Midnight*, working with producer Rick Rubin to strip down their sound and enter a brand new era.

"*Meteora* really set the stage for us to make *Minutes To Midnight* and to begin to branch out," agrees Dave, considering the album's legacy. "But I think more than anything, it needed to prove to listeners that what we had done or accomplished on *Hybrid Theory* wasn't an accident, and that we did have something to say."

METEORA 20TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION IS OUT NOW VIA WARNER RECORDS

The cultural impact of *Meteora* went far beyond its initial burst of success. In 2003, *Session*, the album's eerie instrumental track composed entirely of scratching and sampling, courtesy of turntablist Joe Hahn, was nominated for a Grammy. The following year, the band teamed up with rapper Jay-Z for the now iconic, MTV-sponsored mashup collab, *Collision Course*.

"Mike had just gotten off the phone call with management saying, 'OK, Jay-Z wants to do this new thing through MTV with us,'" says Dave, remembering the moment they heard the news. "At that point, Jay was an artist that we loved – one of our favourite rappers. We were like, 'Holy crap, we don't know what that means, but yup, let's make this happen.'"

In 2006, the band and Jay-Z won the Grammy for Best Rap/Sung Collaboration for *Numb/Encore*, and performed it at the awards ceremony, with a star vocal turn from Paul McCartney.

GETTY

Linkin Park: *Hybrid Theory* and *Meteora* were groundbreaking

PRESS/JAMES MINCHIN II

LOST AND FOUND

In February, Linkin Park released *Lost*, an unheard song from the *Meteora* sessions. Bassist Dave 'Phoenix' Farrell recalls its conception and discovery

WHAT CAN YOU REMEMBER ABOUT RECORDING THE SONG *LOST*?
Dave: "*Lost* is a track that made it all the way through the process [in 2002]. We recorded it in the same sessions that we recorded the rest of the album, and it was mixed by Andy Wallace. Because of that process, it sounds exactly like it fits on *Meteora*. Our intention with *Lost* was always to use it in some space. It doesn't necessarily make the album, but there's always going to be a TV show, a movie or something [we can use it for], or as a bonus track."

WHEN DID YOU REDISCOVER THE SONG?
"We just kind of forgot about it and found it, like, a year and a half ago and said, 'We never used this song. That's insane.' It's crazy that this song exists and it's just lived on these drives and we've never actually plugged it into anything."

HOW DID YOU FEEL WHEN YOU HEARD IT AGAIN AFTER ALL OF THESE YEARS?
"I felt pretty conflicted. I've always loved Chester's voice so, to hear it again on something that I'd forgotten about was exciting and special and new. I still felt like, 'Holy crap, that voice.' Like, 'Wow, I'm still in love with that voice.' But then there was conflicting emotion, just missing him and missing the chance to get to hang out with him and laugh with him. And I think that in a way, that's the same connection that a lot of our fans have with him and with his voice. I have that in common with a lot of people."

TENACIOUS D

THE GREATEST SHOWMEN

Getting booed by Tool's audience, befriending a demonic Dave Grohl, giving Slash a ride on their private jet and pissing off Lemmy? This is the incredible story of Tenacious D

WORDS: JOE DALY • PICTURES: TRAVIS SHINN

TENACIOUS D

The Tejon Theatre, Bakersfield, California, December 15, 1995. Tenacious D are staring out at a sea of raging hostility and wondering what the hell they're doing here.

This is not how it was supposed to be. The pair – Jack Black and Kyle Gass – have spent the past few months building a cult following in their hometown of Los Angeles with an act that combines comedy sketches and offbeat acoustic songs that celebrate their love of metal, sex and inter-band politics. The conceit is that Tenacious D believe they are the best band in the world, and they play every show as if they are headlining a football stadium. That both Jack and Kyle have serious acting chops alongside serious songwriting skills is essential to selling this gag.

Among their early supporters is Tool frontman Maynard James Keenan, who has invited Tenacious D to open for his band for three shows, starting with this one. Unfortunately, it's falling well short of the transcendent comedic triumph that all parties have envisioned. Right now, armed only with acoustic guitars and an arsenal of gags, Jack and Kyle are facing a barrage of venomous cheers from an audience primed for the concussive barrage of Tool.

"I didn't feel like we weren't ready for prime time," says Jack today. "I just felt like, 'Oh, this is what happens when we don't go to the right audience.' We know Tool. Tool's great, but that crowd – they came for Tool or you better be a lot like Tool. Ha ha! We were a lot softer than Tool. We came out playing *Jesus Ranch* and they were like, 'What?!'"

Shaken but resolute, Tenacious D finish that night's set and the two remaining support slots as well. This is more than just a baptism of fire, it's another in a string of progressively bigger challenges that the two men will face, galvanising their confidence and becoming a crucial waystation on the most unlikely heavy metal odyssey in history.

Because here's the dirty little secret about Tenacious D – when they take the stage, pretending to be the best band in the world, in that moment there's a part of them that really means it.

In the beginning, there was no Tenacious D, just a pair of would-be actors crossing paths in one of LA's countless theatre troupes.

"I liked being close to the excitement of the entertainment capital of the universe," says Jack, speaking to *Hammer* with Kyle via Zoom. Referred to in D-speak as 'JB' or 'Jables', he's garrulous, passionate and prone to manic bouts of hyperbole. Born in Hermosa Beach, California, his family moved to Culver City, just south of Hollywood and Beverly Hills. "You could feel its hot, black, throbbing meat just emanating from the veins of Hollywood. You couldn't avoid its dark magic and I didn't want to live anywhere else."

Kyle Gass – aka 'Kage' – is the yin to his partner's yang: thoughtful, polite and possessed of a dry humour that dovetails perfectly into Jack's sledgehammer flow (the pair's real-life dynamic is really just a slightly toned-down version of their Tenacious D personas). Kyle trundled down to Los Angeles from Northern California in the early 80s, harbouring dreams of becoming an actor. "The music, for me, was kind of Plan B," he says. "I figured I'd just keep practising and maybe I could play in bars. I don't know, I just had some weird notion of music as a back-up plan."

They met at the end of the 80s through theatre company The Actors' Gang. Kyle was already a member, while Jack was, in his own words, "a fanboy". The latter eventually landed a spot in the troupe, but ironically relations between the two men were initially frosty.

"There was a weird kind of rivalry," says Jack. "I think he was a little threatened by the new kid trying to take his musical comedy spot, but then finally he realised that I just wanted to be his protegé."

The frostiness melted completely during the summer of 1989, when The Actors' Gang performed at the Edinburgh Festival. Perhaps it was the uncommonly strong weed or the eight-hour jetlag, but on a walk about town, they decided that McDonald's merited investigation.

"We go, 'Let's go see if McDonald's tastes the same in Scotland, because it might have Scottish roots because of the 'Mc' in 'McDonalds'," says Jack. "We thought that was so dumb and funny. It tasted exactly the same as in America. Maybe a tiny bit different. The fries were better, right, Kage?"

"Yeah," Kyle replies, "the fries were better but something was off with the burger."

Following their McBonding session, the two regrouped in LA and, over heroic amounts of grass, Kyle taught Jack how to play guitar. In short order, they wrote their first song, the forlorn acoustic break-up number *Melissa* (it's easily found on YouTube).

"We realised right after we wrote that song that it was bad and that we were not going to be a serious band that wrote serious songs," says Jack. "I never wanted to sing it live because it was too embarrassing and, like, emotional."

"THE FIRST SONG WE BONDED OVER WAS METALLICA'S *ONE*"

JACK BLACK

Instead, they turned their attention to much heavier fare.

"Really," says Jack, "the first song that we bonded over, that I played for Kyle and was like, 'Check this out, this is the best song in the world', was Metallica's *One*."

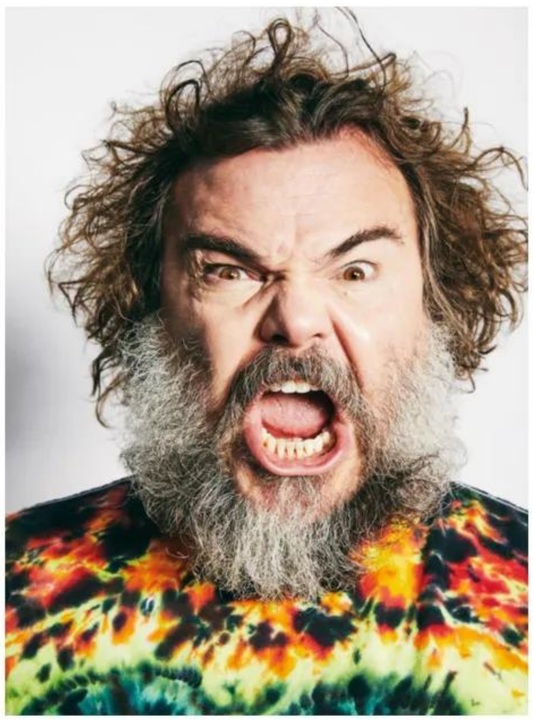
Kyle: "That was kind of the real *Tribute* inspiration."

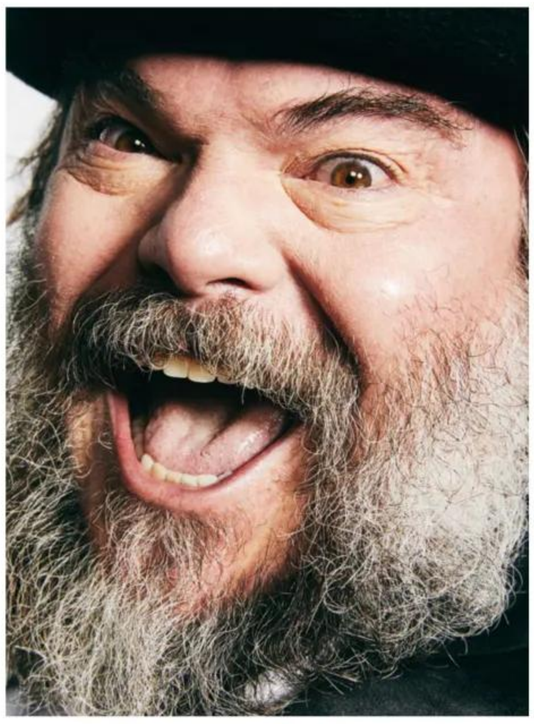
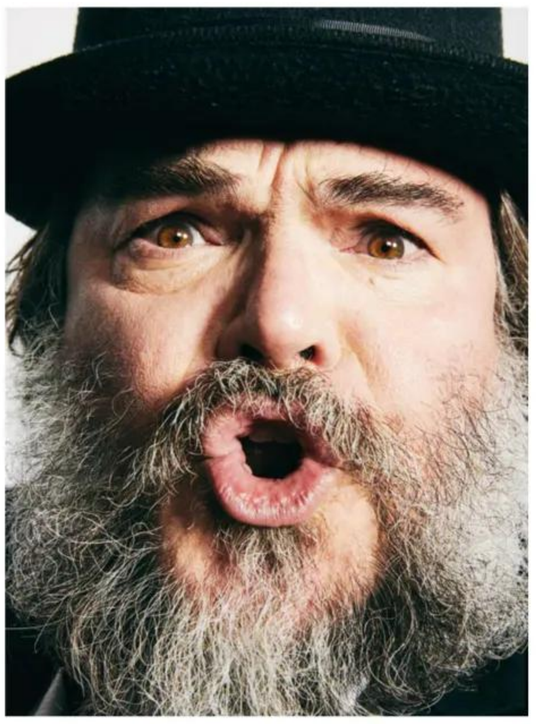
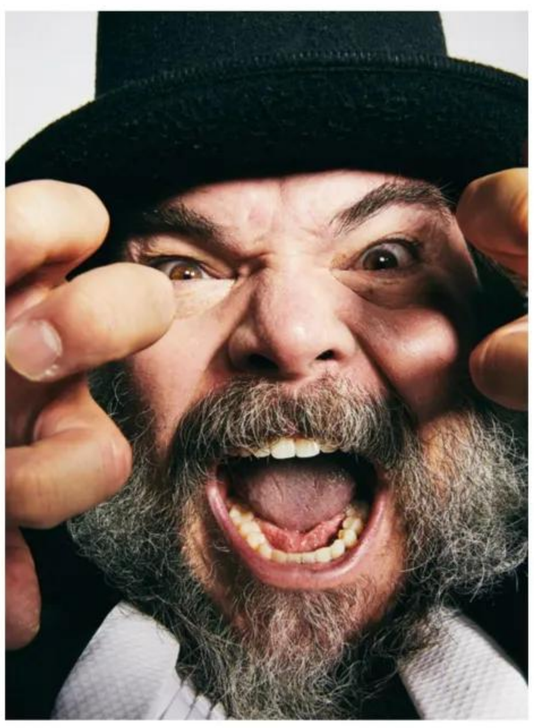
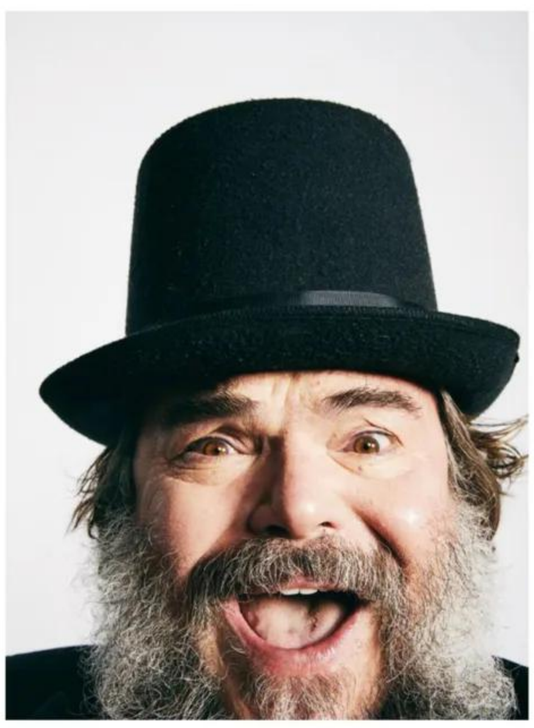
Tribute, of course, is Tenacious D's breakout 2002 single. An absurdist take on the mythical Devil-at-the-crossroads trope in which Tenacious D encounter a horned, hoofed demon (memorably played by D über-fan Dave Grohl in the video) who demands that they play the best song in the world. On the spot, they actually come up with the best song in the world. They defeat the demon but forget the song, rendering the titular track as merely a tribute to the forgotten best song in the world. In reality, *Tribute* had been written years earlier, not long after the ill-fated *Melissa*.

"There are probably bands that wrote their flagship song on the first one," says Kyle. "I guess with us, it was our second one."

Tenacious D – the name comes from a comment by US sports commentator Marv Albert, referring to a basketball team's tenacious defence – played their inaugural show in 1994 at a local LA coffee shop called Highland Grounds. Their set featured a hybrid of comedy sketches and acoustic songs. In addition to *Tribute* – their only original at the time – they covered Crosby, Stills, Nash & Young's *Find The Cost Of Freedom* and performed a sketch that ripped the piss out of Sting's *The Dream Of The Blue Turtles*. Serendipitously, in the audience that evening was legendary comic actor Harry Shearer – aka Spinal Tap bassist Derek Smalls.

It was another comedian, David Cross, who would help kickstart Tenacious D's rise. He liked their set so much that he invited them to appear on *Mr. Show With Bob And David*, the TV sketch series he had created with future *Breaking*



TENACIOUS D

Bad/Better Call Saul star Bob Odenkirk. The D's involvement with *Mr. Show* raised their profile immeasurably.

"We went from playing in front of 80 people to a thousand people," says Jack. "We were building a following."

On the back of it, the duo scored a deal with HBO for their own eponymous show, releasing three episodes between 1997 and 2000. It was during this period that they met another famous fan – one who would figure prominently in their future.

"We first met Dave Grohl at The Viper Room," says Kyle, referring to the storied Sunset Strip club. "Right before the show, Dave pops his head in and says, 'Hey guys! It's me, Dave! Have a great show!' And then he's gone and we have to play the show knowing that Dave Grohl is out there."

Their own star may have been on the rise, but they were still a pair of giddy rock fans at heart. "He's just a hero," says Kyle of their best-known devotee. "He's the Nirvana guy!"

By the time Tenacious D recorded their self-titled 2001 debut album, they were dangerously close to becoming a legitimate rock band. With hip Beastie Boys/Beck associates The Dust Brothers onboard as producers, Jack and Kyle envisaged it as a mix of comedy sketches and original songs. They were insistent that the songs should be acoustic, reflecting their live shows, but The Dust Brothers had other ideas.

"They were like, 'We've gotta build a supergroup to back you guys up," recalls Jack. "We don't think it should be an acoustic album. We should fucking bust this out with a full rock band. Do you know any well-known musicians that we could put in an all-star supergroup?'"

The obvious candidate was the man they had met briefly at The Viper Room a few years earlier. But, explained Jack and Kyle, there was zero chance of it happening. Undaunted, the Dust Brothers insisted they try. And so they reached out and asked Grohl if he would guest on a track.

"He was like, 'Yeah, I'll come down and do a song,'" says Jack. "When he got to the studio, we basically locked the door and said, 'Come on, dude, it'll be really quick – let's just do the whole record.' He fucking crushed the living daylights out of the album. It added another layer of rocket boosters."

Released on September 25, 2001 and featuring songs that had been road-tested at gigs and on their HBO special, the album sold more than 600,000 copies in the UK and a million in the US.

"It was just so satisfying to take it to the next level like that," says Jack. "There's a couple songs on the album that we didn't use a full band on that just sounded better with just acoustic guitars. But at the end of the day, a lot of those songs are meant to be rocked hard with a band."

"I disagree," counters Kyle. "We spent years…"

"We're not Simon & Garfunkel, OK?" interrupts Jack. "We're fucking Black Sabbath!"

In the typical Hollywood three-act drama, the first act introduces the characters (in this case Tenacious D) and lays out their goals (world domination, basically). It's the second act where things go dark and this was very much the case for Jack Black and Kyle Gass.

In 2006, the pair released their debut full-length movie, *Tenacious D In The Pick Of Destiny*, accompanied by an album of the same name. Moving from sketches to a full-length film was quite a jump, but it was one they relished.

"We just wanted to fucking party with the form," says Jack. "The long form, because we had done the little bite-sized Chicken McNuggets of comedy rock but we wanted to stretch that out."

A heavy metal hero's journey bursting with slapstick humour, *The Pick Of Destiny* boasted a pack of Hollywood stars including Ben Stiller, Tim Robbins, Amy Poehler and Fred Armisen, along with epic turns from such rock A-listers as Ronnie James Dio, Meat Loaf and their old buddy Dave Grohl. By then, both Jack and Kyle had emerged as actors in their own right, thanks to the appearances in movies such as *School Of Rock* and *Elf* respectively.

But *The Pick Of Destiny* bombed right out of the gate. Critics lambasted its sophomoric humour (in fairness, one scene involves Jack's character using his penis to deactivate a laser). What Jack and Kyle had hoped would be the first instalment of a lucrative film franchise was a box office flop.

In 2022, Tenacious D released an audiobook, *The Road To Redunktion*, in which they charted the history of the band. In it, they reveal that commercial failure of *The Pick Of Destiny* was a blow. For Kyle, the situation was compounded by the fact his bandmate had the cushion of fame as an A-list actor that he didn't.

According to the book, Kyle spiralled into depression, and there are allusions to substance abuse. Eventually, Jack flew to LA to support his friend and to arrange for an intervention. Though initially opposed to treatment, Kyle eventually accepted the lifeline. Jack hired a private jet to take Kyle to treatment and en route the two wrestled, cried and confronted some of the childhood traumas that they had both experienced. Kyle completed the programme, returned to work and the D were back in business.

"DAVE GROHL IS JUST A HERO. HE'S THE NIRVANA GUY!"

KYLE GASS

This period inspired one of Tenacious D's best songs, 2012's *The Ballad Of Hollywood Jack And The Rage Kage*. Building from a three-chord chug into a surging, full-band throwdown, it outlines the story of Kyle's struggles in characteristically OTT fashion.

"Hollywood Jack hit the big time and went to make movies / Rage Kage was left far behind in the dust of his dreams," sings Jack in his booming baritone, but the theatrics are underpinned with very real emotion.

When the subject of this seemingly dark chapter is raised, Kyle pauses, then begins to respond before Jack cuts in.

"You don't have to answer that question if you're uncomfortable with it," he says, adopting an authoritative tone that makes it difficult to determine whether he's being serious or playful. Kyle begins to speak but Jack again cuts him off, "Nope! Nope! No more questions! Read the audiobook if you want to hear more about that dirt!"

"I will say that *The Ballad Of Hollywood Jack And The Rage Kage* is 100% accurate," says Kyle with a laugh. Then he's serious. "It's a meaningful jam for me."

Dropping his irate publicist character, Jack adds, "What's weird is that it's one of our most powerful jams and it's because we did go to some actual deep, dark places, which we promised ourselves we would never do after the first song we wrote about my break-up, about my heartache and feeling of loss and pain, and yet we had to come back to that actual real sauce to find out."

"I don't disagree," says Kyle simply.

Whatever happened during that time, Tenacious D came roaring back in 2012 with *Rize Of The Fenix*. The album was nominated for a Grammy for Best Comedy Album (they lost to stand-up turned chat show host Jimmy Fallon). They would finally win a Grammy three years later, beating Anthrax, Slipknot, Mastodon and Motörhead to the Best ▶

Metal Performance award for their cover of Dio's *The Last In Line* from the Ronnie James Dio tribute album *This Is Your Life* (the award proved controversial in some quarters – Mastodon's Bill Kelliher dismissively compared it to "Weird Al Yankovic winning Best Rap Album for a Snoop Dogg song").

But Kyle's travails weren't quite over. In 2012, Tenacious D played before their largest-ever crowd at Germany's sprawling Rock Am Ring festival. As they ripped through belters such as *The Metal, Beelzeboss (The Final Showdown)* and *Tribute*, members of headliners Metallica watched them from the side of the stage and everything seemed to be going great. But Kyle was feeling disorientated and unwell during their set. He managed to push through the show, but afterwards he was diagnosed with Bell's palsy, a neurological condition that can lead to temporary paralysis of the face.

"I woke up with Bell's palsy on the day of my biggest concert!" he says now.

"Weirdly," says Jack, "it was the best show because it was the biggest show and they fucking loved us! And it was the worst show because Kyle was fucked up."

Today, Kyle is in good health and proud to have left it all on the field that day.

"I did get a bronze star," he jokes. "It was pretty metal. But it's also like, 'Listen, I gotsta get paid.' You could have propped me up there. I'm a greedy bastard."

"WE'RE NOT SIMON & GARFUNKEL. WE'RE FUCKING BLACK SABBATH"

JACK BLACK

The ordeal of facing hostile audiences like the ones at those Tool gigs are long gone for Tenacious D. These days, they're the best-connected Dio-loving acoustic comedy-metal duo on the planet.

They've opened for Metallica more than once over the years. "For some reason, it was a better fit than Tool," says Jack. "I don't know why… that crowd really embraced us."

Then there was a memorable encounter with Slash when they gave him a ride home on their private jet after a show in Las Vegas. "Slash was like, 'Oh man, that was the greatest show', and we were like, 'You saw that fucking show?' and he was like, 'Yeah, man, I love Tenacious D!'" says Jack proudly.

In January 2015, they hooked up with the Guns N' Roses guitarist and the Foo Fighters onstage at LA's Staples Center for a propulsive version of Led Zeppelin's *Immigrant Song* during Dave Grohl's 46th birthday gig. "All of a sudden we had this fucking mountaintop jam with Slash and Dave Grohl and it was fucking cream dream deluxe," says Jack.

Not all of their rock'n'roll fantasies have played out as they would have hoped. While preparing to open for Motörhead in L.A. one evening, word came down right before their set that Lemmy – unaware that he had an opener, let alone that it was Tenacious D – wanted none of it.

"We get the word that Lemmy said, 'No! I don't want nobody opening! Fuck sake! I don't need 'em, I don't want 'em!'" says Jack. "We were like, 'Oh, fuck, Lemmy hates us. He's not gonna let us do the thing.' I think what it really was, was that he was just pissed that the show didn't sell out

SEX, SATAN AND RONNIE JAMES DIO!

Ten essential Tenacious D anthems

Kielbasa (Tenacious D, 2001)
The D's debut album lacked nothing in terms of face-palming double entendres and sex metaphors explicit enough to make a biker blush, but this funky-fresh banger about sex and weed is stupidly addictive.

Wonderboy (Tenacious D, 2001)
A mythical retelling of their origin story, with Jack and Kyle as bitter arch-rivals Wonderboy and Young Nastyman, combining their powers to become the mighty Tenacious D. A sweet slice of childlike escapism, albeit if the child was no stranger to smoking or profanity.

Fuck Her Gently (Tenacious D, 2001)
How many kids lost stereo privileges because they didn't skip over this track fast enough when their parents were home? A sugary sweet and deeply NSFW ode to lovemaking at its most tender, it was one of the D's earliest and most talked-about hits.

Tribute (Tenacious D, 2001)
Turning the old selling-your-soul-to-the-Devil-at-the-crossroads story on its head, the guys defeat a demon by writing the greatest song in the world on the spot, only to forget it. Good luck not singing along and gesticulating wildly.

Kickapoo (The Pick Of Destiny, 2006)
The overture in *The Pick Of Destiny*'s opening scene features sublime cameos from two of rock's greatest voices – Meat Loaf and Ronnie James Dio. *Kickapoo* drives to a feverish conclusion with a riff straight out of *Smells Like Teen Spirit*. Did we mention Meat Loaf and Dio?

The Metal (The Pick Of Destiny, 2006)
Hands-down, the purest slab of metal in the Tenacious D catalogue. Spiralling fretwork, rubbery basslines and the seismic drumming of Dave Grohl gather into a flamethrowing beatdown celebrating the failure of grunge, punk, new wave and other genres to kill metal. Jack's scream at 0:47 is pure Slayer.

Beelzeboss (The Final Showdown) (The Pick Of Destiny, 2006)
The supernatural Satanic climax of *The Pick Of Destiny* demands a suitably fiendish anthem and that's precisely what this track delivers. With Dave Grohl as Satan and the surging power of a full band behind them, this is the D's catchiest and most enduring tune.

Rize Of The Fenix (Rize Of The Fenix, 2012)
The title track of their 2012 self-styled 'comeback' album opens with a simmering acoustic chug and builds into a galloping rocker that feels like Iron Maiden swigging bottles of wine with The Who, complete with a dreamy space rock outro about people with Tenacious D tattoos. Because why not?

Roadie (Rize Of The Fenix, 2012)
Awash in soaring atmospherics and big rock harmonies, this ode to the amp-carrying legions across the planet boasts one of their all-time best videos, featuring actor Danny McBride as the greatest roadie of all time. Seriously, you need to see it.

The Ballad Of Hollywood Jack And The Rage Kage (Rize Of The Fenix, 2012)
Within this slow-building saga of alienation and redemption lies the very real beating heart of Tenacious D. Feathery acoustic strumming soars to a dramatic peak by way of a flute solo, no less. According to Jack, "It's one of our most powerful jams."

and he didn't want to admit that we were actually helping." They did the set anyway, with Lemmy none the wiser.

There is one thing Tenacious D bristle at slightly, and that's comparisons with spoof metal icons Spinal Tap. Not because they aren't fans – far from it. But Spinal Tap aren't real, and Tenacious D – despite occasional appearances to the contrary – very much are.

"Spinal Tap is the fucking gold standard," says Jack. "The thing is that they were pretending to be rock stars. We're more playing ourselves when we get up there. Spinal Tap were all doing characters with the accents and making fun of the genre. We don't make fun of it as much as Spinal Tap does and we don't put on any fake accents. We actually love it. We are funny just because we're idiots."

That idiocy shows no signs of slowing down. Tenacious D begin a European tour in June, which includes their biggest-ever UK headlining show, at London's 20,000-capacity O2 arena. Jack's also hinted that there could be sequels to both *The Pick Of Destiny* and *School Of Rock* in the pipeline. And then there's the follow-up to their most recent album, 2018's *Post-Apocalypto*.

"Well, you know, I have a little bit of OCD, so I've always felt that this next album would be released in the summer of 2024 because then I will be 55 – I can't drive 55 [a reference to ex-Van Halen frontman Sammy Hagar's 1984 hit] – and Kage will be, [singing The Beatles' song] 'Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when he's 64.' In the summer of '24. Mega fucking album from the D. A big album is gonna drop."

"That's how we do things," adds Kyle.

That is indeed how they do things. When you're the best band in the world, it's the only way.

TENACIOUS D'S SINGLE *VIDEO GAMES* AND COVER OF CHRIS ISAAK'S *WICKED GAME* ARE BOTH OUT NOW. A NEW STUDIO ALBUM IS EXPECTED IN 2024

"WE DON'T MAKE FUN OF METAL. WE ACTUALLY LOVE IT"

JACK BLACK

FIVE MINUTES WITH

ADAM ZAARS

TRIBULATION

They might have lost their chief songwriter, but the future is bright for goth metal stars Tribulation

WORDS: CATHERINE MORRIS

DIRK BEHLAU/PIXELEYE/PRESS

You've recently released the *Hamartia* EP. Why an EP, and why now?
"We had a switch in members with Jonathan [Hultén] leaving and Joseph [Tholl] coming in on guitar, and we wanted Joseph to be part of the songwriting without doing a full album right away, so an EP felt like a good choice. We wanted to give ourselves a soft start with this new incarnation of the band."

Jonathan was one of the band's chief songwriters – how difficult was it writing without him?
"I always felt confident that we'd be able to continue and that we'd always find whatever makes Tribulation, Tribulation in my songs. The most fun thing with this session was working with Joseph again – we've been playing music together since we were kids, so we know each other really well and he brought a new kind of energy to the band. Also, because he knows us so well, he's not afraid to bring ideas to the band even if he thinks we won't like them. That drives the songs in new directions."

You've covered Blue Öyster Cult's *Vengeance (The Pact)* on the EP. Are they an important band for you?
"Absolutely. We've been thinking about covering them for the last decade. It's difficult to find songs to cover that we won't completely ruin with the vocals; we had to adapt, putting some clean vocals on there, with even Johannes [Andersson, bass/vocals] singing semi-clean vocals at the end."

Did you know he could do that?
"We knew, but when we've tried clean vocals before it's usually been more of a deeper-voiced, Sisters Of Mercy kinda thing. It was great actually recording it and seeing that, OK, it works!"

Is *Hamartia* a good indicator of where Tribulation are heading?
"It could be, but to be honest I don't know! We have a few ideas for the album that we just started writing and hopefully we'll be able to do something a bit more fresh, because the EP is still quite in line with what we've been doing the last eight years or so. I'm interested in what that will sound like."

Are there any new influences present on the EP?
"Actually, something that hasn't been there for a while is German thrash metal, which we talked about when we wrote the songs. With the title track, *Hamartia*, we certainly thought about Sodom and Kreator when making the verse and the bridge. Otherwise, it's horror soundtracks and whatever other music we usually listen to – Fields Of The Nephilim, Deathspell Omega…"

You're cited as a band leading the new gothic metal scene. How do you feel about that?
"I don't really pay attention to that kind of thing, but I don't mind the label. We have a difficult-to-pin-down idea of what Tribulation is. It's obviously got something to do with extreme metal and we can move in that space, but we've always been inspired by a lot of music other than metal in general. So what are we? I don't know. We've wandered into some kind of goth thing; that was never our intention. I do listen to goth bands, so we might share similar influences with gothic metal in a sense. That's perfectly fine by me."

What was it like going on the Chariots Of Fire tour with Watain, Abbath and Bölzer?
"We've known them all for a long time and everyone in the crew. We shared a bus with Watain – it's always very inspiring to be around those guys. They're very creative people, always giving you a bunch of ideas, wanting all the bands around them to step up their game. All in all, it was fantastic, and the shows were good, but mainly just hanging out was great. The days off were planned really well, too – in Marseille we went off to an island and hung out on the beach all day eating good French food and drinking wine."

What's next for you?
"I'm sure we're gonna go somewhere for a few shows in the autumn. But we're not gonna be touring until we have another album out, so we're mainly focusing on writing the album, and hopefully recording it at the end of the year!"

"COVERS? IT'S HARD TO FIND SONGS WE WON'T RUIN WITH THE VOCALS"

***TRIBULATION'S LATEST EP, HAMARTIA*, IS OUT NOW VIA CENTURY MEDIA RECORDS**

THE AVENGED IS DEAD

Powered by existentialism and hallucinogens, Avenged Sevenfold went and crafted the weirdest album by a major metal band in decades. We found out more

WORDS: STEVE APPLEFORD • PICTURES: BRIAN CATELLE

AVENGED SEVENFOLD

YOU KNEW

Bassist Johnny Christ enjoys the calm before the storm

Shadows and his wife, Valary, were having a night out at a local bar when the psychedelic mushrooms began to take hold. A new Avenged Sevenfold album was already in the works, but the singer wasn't seeking chemically enhanced inspiration at that moment – until the feelings of love and happiness got intense.

"Then we got home," Shadows recalls, "and we just had this connection, being so sure that we had travelled through space and time to be together in every life that we meet up in – the ultimate love story."

From that experience, Shadows wrote the lyrics to *Cosmic*, a sweeping ballad with influences from Elton John to Daft Punk and *808s*-era Kanye West, and nothing to remind you of metal. It's also the longest track on the mind-expanding new Avenged Sevenfold album, *Life Is But A Dream...*, with a romantic vocal that promises: *'as we chase through the stars beyond forever / I'll follow you'*.

"Do I believe that's the truth? Probably not. But on some sort of other level? Yes. Maybe," Shadows says with a grin. "That's not where my belief system lies, but I thought it was a really compelling song. And I did experience that and feel full-heartedly, 100% that that was the truth when I was living in it, you know? We felt like she was some queen and I was some guy that was in the Roman Army, and it was like a movie. It's probably [because of] a million movies we've seen, and it all festered its way into our brains."

Shadows looks perfectly relaxed as he describes the track, sitting inside the band's warehouse headquarters in Huntington Beach, California, clad in a Black Flag T-shirt and black Avenged Sevenfold-brand mesh shorts, his hair cropped short on the sides, long on top. But he knows this is the quiet before the storm, that metal fans will be tested by Avenged Sevenfold's eighth album.

The music is fuelled by wild experimentation and the occasional psychedelic, balancing heavy riffs with textures and ideas culled from other genres and dimensions. It is the band's magnum opus, an album of mini-epics and pocket symphonies, absorbing sweeping moments of pop, prog, jazz, gypsy folk, hip hop, Daft Punk-style robotics, classical melody, the Phil Spector 'Wall of Sound', and even some crooning from the Sinatra school. Shadows is excited to watch the fallout.

"I want to make an impact. I want to make bold art," he says of the album. "I think after people get used to it, it won't be so crazy. And then it'll be like, 'Well, what's next?' That's the journey we're all on."

That makes *Life Is But A Dream...* both a confrontation and an invitation, as the band seek to change the definition of what an Avenged Sevenfold song is supposed to sound like. Last December, Shadows tweeted his top five most-played artists on Apple Music, which might have been a clue to his state of mind: The Commodores, Weezer, Kanye West, Queens Of The Stone Age and Billy Joel. And yet, just the other day, he had Slayer's *Divine Intervention* on repeat in the car for hours, happily feeding off its raw power.

"I consider us a metal band. We're definitely influenced by Slayer and Pantera and Metallica and some quirkier things," he says. "We're just trying to put our own twist on it."

The first public glimpse of the new album was its debut single, the nearly-six-minute *Nobody*, which mixes ominous guitars with a trap beat and a full orchestra, male harmonies more R'n'B than metal and, shortly before an epic guitar solo, a mysterious declaration from Shadows: *'I'm a God, I'm awake, I'm the one in everything / I'm alive, I'm the dead. I'm a man without a head.'* Initial reactions were mixed – surprised, angry, confused, ecstatic. Some fans embraced the sound immediately; others didn't get it at all.

"They're like, 'That is fucking shit! These guys forgot how to write a song! Why would you put a solo at the end?'" says Shadows. "We were just laughing. That was more fun to us than someone saying, 'Oh, this is great.' We always gear towards a little bit of ruffling feathers."

That song only hints at what the rest of *Life Is But A Dream...* offers. Working with Joe Barresi, who also produced 2016's *The Stage*, guitarist Synyster Gates calls it "a full U-turn. It's just like a blast off into outer space."

Its schizophrenic soundscape amounts to the world's loudest musical variety show of 2023. A key inspiration for Shadows was *Disco Volante* by Mr. Bungle, and the singer adapted some of Mike Patton's vocal tricks and techniques – singing through a vocoder, a talkbox, a small Pignose amp, a Kaoss Pad effects device, various kids' toys, and cranking up the autotune for full robotic effect. Also on his mind was the genre-shattering hyperpop of 100 Gecs, and his adolescent memories of earlier bands crossing their own stylistic boundaries, like Radiohead dropping all guitars on 2000's *Kid A*, or Weezer getting raw and uncomfortably personal on 1996's *Pinkerton* [see 'California Dreamin', p.42].

"Those records made me feel uncomfortable about myself at first, but I learned something about myself

M. Shadows is looking forward to ruffling a few feathers

"I WAS SOME GUY IN THE ROMAN ARMY"

M. SHADOWS

from discovering them," says Shadows, putting *Life Is But A Dream...* in that same category. "I think this will do that to some people, because most of the people I've given it to have come back days later and gone, 'This kind of fucked me up.'"

Work on *Life Is But A Dream...* began after Avenged Sevenfold cancelled the final leg of their 2018 tour, due to a viral infection that affected Shadows' vocal cords. The band returned home to Huntington Beach and started writing new songs. Shadows and Synyster would sit together for hours, hashing out their ideas, usually at the latter's house. The album took nearly five years to complete.

"It feels like an entire lifetime," says Synyster, whose daughter, Monroe, was born in the interim. "We needed a break after two decades of doing stuff, but we needed to go to work because there was a creative itch."

On the new songs, there are riffs as tough and heavy as anything from the band's past, but the context is completely different. A frantic beat kicks off the crazed *We Love You*, shifting into the grinding guitar that accompanies Shadows as he chants a wish list of society's insatiable appetites: *'More power! More pace! More money! More taste! More sex! More pills! More skin!'* There are moments of stuttering electronics and Beatles melody, closing with guitarist Zacky Vengeance sounding like George Harrison on a 1920s acoustic and a bit of bottleneck to create a warm sound of gypsy jazz, as the band's male chorus of tattooed dudes hums along.

"Me and Gates get [a lot of] joy out of playing crazy jazz chords that we've never, ever incorporated in Avenged Sevenfold," says Zacky.

Getting the band there was a long, strange trip that included psychedelic experiences for two of them in the form of mind-altering venom from the rare Sonoran Desert toad, aka 5-MeO-DMT.

"When we went deep into the 5-MeO-DMT stuff, it was before Covid," explains Shadows. "But you don't just go into that, right? *The Stage* was already starting to deal with these existential things – like, 'Gimme all the information of what we know about why we're here.'"

The Stage, released in 2016, was a concept album about artificial intelligence that closed with a 15-minute ▶

meditation on the Big Bang, narrated by astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson.

"I want to form my worldview based on facts and science, which a lot of times is very nihilistic, then reading philosophy or really great novels about this sort of thing," says Shadows. "And then that record dove into the sort of AI element, which we're dealing with now. And it dove into the Big Bang. This record [*Life Is But A Dream...*] dove into, 'Now what do we do with all that information as a human that has emotions, that evolved to this spot where we have our upper brain [wired for reasoning] and lower brain [wired for primitive responses] and they're battling each other?'"

For the 5-MeO-DMT experimentation, which he hoped would pause that battle, Shadows flew in a shaman, whose skills had previously been employed by engineers at SpaceX and Google. He went through three days of sessions, including one with Syn and another with Valary.

"I don't promote this," he's careful to say. "I don't want to say that everyone needs that."

For Shadows, the trips were eye-opening and difficult, resulting in a "pure existential crisis for a year" and loss of ego at one point, but eventually also a feeling of deep connection to the world.

"You come to terms with how important everyone thinks everything is, and how they work themselves up," he says. "And none of it means anything. You work your fingers to the bones and everyone tells you you're great your whole life. And then all of a sudden, you look back on your life and you go, 'What the fuck was that?' Ha ha ha! I think of The Rev, Jimmy [Sullivan, Avenged's drummer who died in 2009], the way that time works – that dude went to bed one night, didn't wake up, and if he was to wake up today, he would've never known that time had passed. At the end of your life, you're gonna look back on everything the same way you feel now, with maybe a little more aching of a body."

The big questions that followed were directed inward: "Did you enjoy yourself while you were here [on Earth]? Did you create suffering? Did you create more good than bad? There's no answer, right? But it's something I think about a lot, obviously," explains Shadows. "The lyrics are straight from that perspective."

Mattel, a song named after the toy company that produces the likes of Barbie and Hot Wheels, explores the plight of humanity living in an increasingly artificial world. Musically, the song is as varied and extreme as System Of A Down at full boil, ricocheting between divebombing guitars and the jazzy tinkling of piano, until Shadows croons: *'Now I know this might sound crazy, but I've smelled the plastic daisies / And it seems we've found ourselves in Hell.'*

The idea came to Shadows while strolling around his neighbourhood as he was microdosing for months at a time – sometimes with a bit more than a microdose.

"I took my dog on a walk, and all I see is plastic grass and I see plastic homes and people outside doing their plastic things. We're so predictable," Shadows recalls. "And I'm like, dude, this is fucking crazy. I'm one of those people, too!"

Avenged's 2005 hit, *Bat Country*, was famously inspired by a comically bad trip described in Hunter S. Thompson's gonzo tale *Fear And Loathing In Las Vegas*, along with the singer's days thrill-seeking on acid and mushrooms in his 20s. Shadows today craves enlightenment.

"It was the most significant experience of my life," he says. "And that is on top of kids and on top of everything, because it helped me be better for them instead of being this clueless guy that's OK with missing a basketball practice or OK blowing them off because I'm trying to do something."

At 41, he's a journeyman rocker with a history. The only tattoos he's added of late tell an especially personal story: on opposite knees, Shadows has two new crypto punks that ▶

"THE REV WOULD BE STOKED ABOUT THIS ALBUM"

M. SHADOWS

You're fooling no one with those angel wings, lads...

look like pixellated cartoons, one in dark shades to represent himself, the other blonde and female for his wife. Further down are permanent scribbles inked by his two young sons, who were handed a tattoo machine to scrawl versions of their names. His eldest, 10-year-old River, wrote above his dad's ankle: 'RS was here!'

"If I do psychedelics now, I'm a dad," he explains. "I don't do drugs. But I will do these medicines. I'm going to explore, and I want to go hard, and if something's hard I will walk towards it. I want to learn from what's happening."

It's been 14 years since the death of The Rev, with whom Avenged had grown up before together realising their heavy metal dreams. If he was still around, Shadows is certain he would have been onboard with *Life Is But A Dream...*

"He'd be stoked. Me and Brian [Haner, aka Synyster] know that guy better than anyone," says Shadows. "He was always the biggest proponent of instigation and trying new things."

In fact, their late drummer and songwriter is on the new album in more than spirit. The bridge on *Mattel* includes a melody The Rev had created but never found a place for, and on *Beautiful Morning* is a lyric he and Syn had from their previous band, Pinkly Smooth.

"That's something him and Brian came up with a long time ago: *'It's a beautiful morning, it's a beautiful day, everybody is smiling, in a beautiful way',*" explains Shadows. "That's when it gets creepy."

But perhaps the most ambitious part of *Life Is But A Dream...* is the trilogy '*GOD*': *G*, *(O)rdinary*, and *(D)eath* – partly inspired by elaborate hip hop hit *Sicko Mode* by Travis Scott ft. Drake. The prog-rock/funk *G* features Shadows as the voice of the Almighty, after creating the universe in six days, muttering: *'On the seventh day I thought about world peace but I decided just to take it off.'*

(O)rdinary then leans fully into the sound of Daft Punk's 2013 album, *Random Access Memories*, firing up the funky guitar with robotic vocals and a dance beat. *(D)eath* – originally a love song Syn wrote for his wife called *Alone Tonight* – then rises from the mists of a shimmering orchestra, and Shadows croons like Sinatra as the guitars threaten to bring in the storm clouds again.

"The reason it says '*GOD*' is because we thought it was funny that God is like the original G," says Shadows.

The frontman attended Catholic school until he was in sixth grade, and went to church every Wednesday with school and every Sunday with his parents. As time went on, he realised they didn't believe in it, and only went out of tradition. Meanwhile, Shadows was more drawn to science, and came to the conclusion that there probably wasn't a God, at least in the Christian sense. As he's got older, though, he's come to understand that faith can be a comfort blanket.

"I used to argue with every person I could about it, and now I'm actually happy for them if they believe," he says. "And after I did my 5-MeO trip, I came back to my friend Jeremiah, who's hardcore religious, and I realised that he was right all along. His belief system of God is right because he's going to live and die, and will never even know any different."

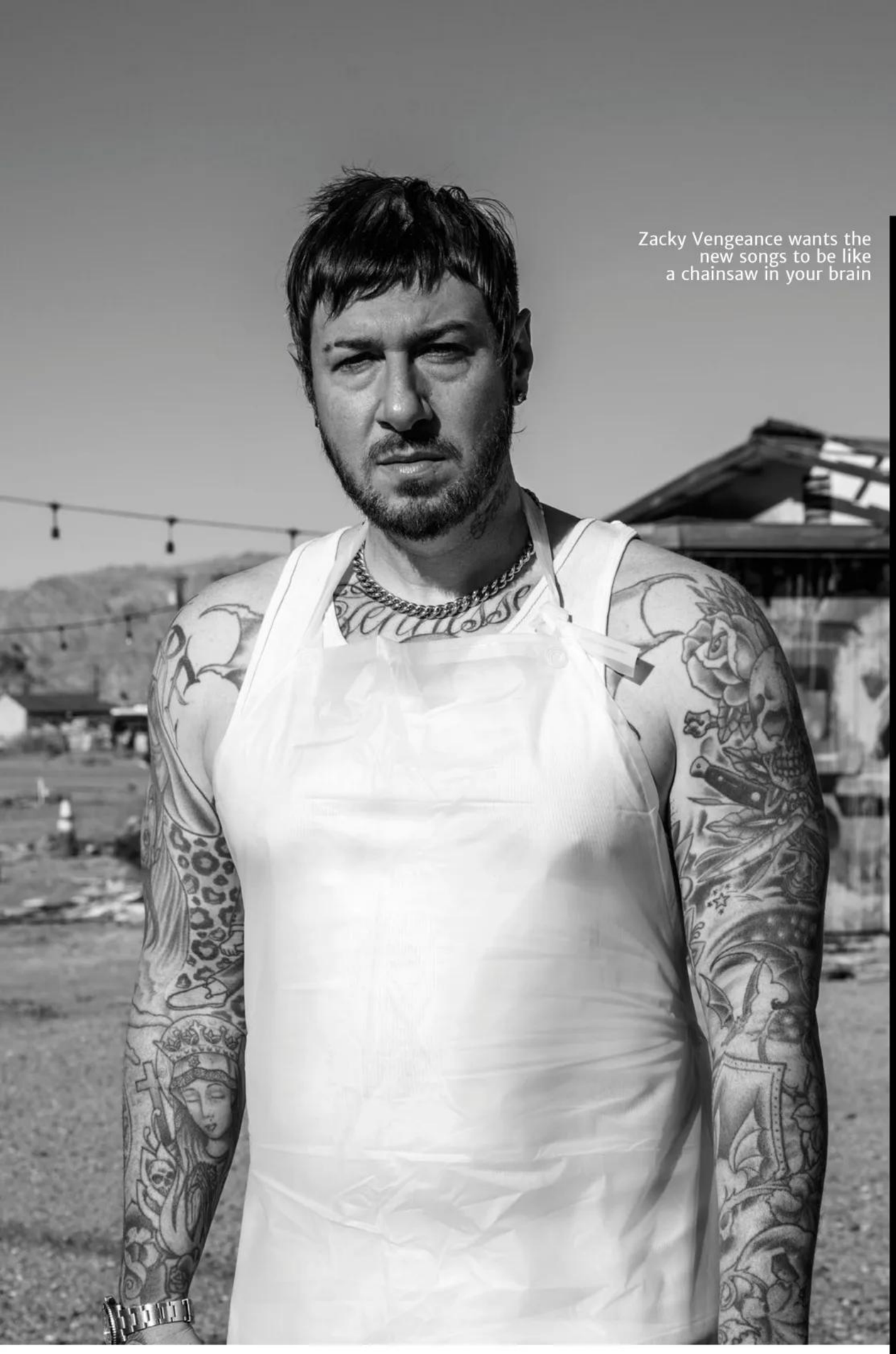
But he's also seen what happens when that belief is tested at the end. A couple of months ago, his devout grandmother passed away, and felt like she had been abandoned.

"She had a very long, painful death," he says. "My dad told me that she was crying, asking where God was on her deathbed. There's a stark reality that if you live long enough, it's going to smack you in the face."

His other grandma had passed away five months before that. She was never religious, and was scared to die.

"I tried to get her in at Johns Hopkins [university] to do some end-of-life psilocybin testing, which has shown incredible results," he explains. "People that come out,

Brooks Wackerman embraced jazz fusion influences



Zacky Vengeance wants the new songs to be like a chainsaw in your brain

"IT TAKES YOUR MIND FOR A SPIN!"

Your guide to every track on *Life Is But A Dream...*

GAME OVER
With acoustic and noisy electric guitars, the opener moves at hyper-speed and delivers "a frantic, heightened sense of anxiety," says Zacky Vengeance. Brooks Wackerman calls it "our most aggressive song on the record and shortest, too. We get to the point and then it's done."

MATTEL
With tough guitars balanced with jazzier effervescence, M. Shadows sings of living in an artificial world while searching for meaning. "Are videogames getting too close to real life? Or is real life emulating the games? It's getting very hard to tell," Shadows says. Adds Zacky: "I love the barrage of noise in the solo. It takes your mind for a complete spin."

NOBODY
The lead-off single combines strings, blasts of guitar noise, jazz, vocal harmonies and an elegant rock solo into an unpredictable whole. Explains Brooks: "You can probably hear some jazz fusion influence between [Synyster Gates] and I as we take off." Adds bassist Johnny Christ: "We kicked around the idea of it sounding like it got inspiration from *Terminator 2*; it sounded like the metal becoming liquid."

WE LOVE YOU
Set to a 4/4 techno beat, the song is a "cross between Mr. Bungle and R. Kelly," says Brooks. Shadows came up with the chant in the shower: "I was like, 'More sex, more pills, more drugs, more, more.' It's everything. Those are the simple little things that are like the 'A-ha!' moments."

COSMIC
Syn says this was meant to be an "adventurous ballad" mixing Daft Punk with Elton John, and took months to piece together. Zacky says the song "makes you feel love and sadness all at once". It was recorded on multiple drum kits, recalls Brooks. "I was tripping over snare drums because we had so many on the floor. It was a drummer's wet dream in there."

BEAUTIFUL MORNING
With a Brian Wilson-ish wall of sound, this has screaming metal guitar and ominous vocal harmonies à la Alice In Chains. "We went so far off the rails that we were just laughing, and then we found ourselves reeling ourselves back in," says Zacky, calling the song "a nod back to stuff that we love listening to".

EASIER
Originally an insecure love song written many years ago by Synyster: "I would sing it to [The Rev] and he'd just fucking crack up." Musical influences are Kanye, Stevie Wonder, Led Zeppelin drums and Faith No More. "It's jazzy, it's funky, it's progressive," says Zacky, with new "witty lyrics that tie into this story of man and mankind and how highly we think of ourselves".

GOD:
G
This trio of tracks inspired by Travis Scott's complex rap hit *Sicko Mode* kicks off with a rush of prog beats and electronics, and background vocals by Taura Stinson and Brianna Mazzola. "This is Frank Zappa meets Daft Punk meets Stevie Wonder meets Sinatra meets *Wizard Of Oz*," explains Shadows.

(O)RDINARY
A first for A7X, this song about a robot is built with funk guitar, closing with the threatening sound of an oncoming car engine. Says Shadows: "What would a robot want to be asking its creator? Am I conscious? Is this real? Is that love? What am I feeling?"

(D)EATH
With music originally written by Syn for his wife as *Alone Tonight*, the track now has extreme shades of light and dark, with dozens of jazz chords and a Sinatra vocal by Shadows. "It's completely depressing and absolutely glorious at the same time," says Zacky. "It's kind of an acceptance of the insane journey that life is and how we all end up leaving it."

LIFE IS BUT A DREAM...
Originally called 'Il sogno del fiume' [translation: River's Dream], this instrumental by Syn was written for Shadows' firstborn son, River, 10 years ago. "I spent the last two years of my life learning how to play that song. And it was the craziest undertaking I've ever experienced," says Syn. Zacky calls it "a sombre and uplifting ending to a very cathartic album".

"WE WANT THE GUITARS TO GIVE PEOPLE ANXIETY"

ZACKY VENGEANCE

they're not afraid of dying anymore; they understand they're one with the universe, and they see it as a portal to move on. It's hard to get people into those. And she died extremely afraid of death and the unknown. That was sad to see, too."

Having stayed in Orange County (drummer Brooks Wackerman is nearby in Long Beach), Avenged Sevenfold are close with their families, and with each other. After Synyster married Valary's twin sister, Michelle, in 2010, the guitarist and Shadows became brothers-in-law.

Closing the album is the title track, an instrumental piece of music that Synyster wrote 10 years ago to celebrate the birth of Shadows' first son, River. He originally wrote and recorded it digitally on a MIDI, a version that Shadows still loves. When Joe Barresi suggested Syn play it on piano, it seemed like a joke; the accomplished guitarist didn't have that level of confidence. So, he spent months practising on his baby Steinway piano.

The song took four days to record, fuelled by coffee, while Syn's wife and kids were away on a trip. It was the last thing he completed for the album. The result is an understated carnival of piano melody and compound chords, played like a master. Aside from his family, he considers the performance "my greatest accomplishment personally". ▶

Synyster Gates is immensely proud of his piano work on the title track

"IT'S A U-TURN. A BLAST OFF INTO OUTER SPACE"

SYNYSTER GATES

Avenged know they will be criticised for *Life Is But A Dream...* ("I realise that when I look at any comment section, they're gonna say, 'The band died with The Rev'," says Shadows at one point), but they don't care. Not only did *The Stage* lay the groundwork for musical experimentation and raise existential questions, by confronting them further, Shadows' perspective and the band's sound have changed dramatically. They also have big plans for their live shows.

"This time around, it's like we want the guitar to be used to create textures, to give people anxiety," says Zacky. "We want these parts to sound like a chainsaw going through your mind."

Meanwhile, Shadows promises "a wrestling/art show meets spiritual/psychedelic experience".

During the process of recording, the band occasionally lost perspective on what they were doing. Near the end, Shadows asked Syn, 'Did we go far enough?', and the guitarist assured him that they had. So, he put on headphones, and listened to the three '*GOD*' songs and the piano title track placed together for the first time.

"My heart started racing and I felt really weird," recalls Shadows. "I called Brian, and I'm like, 'We went far enough.' I was so happy. But I was also scared: what are people going to think when they get to the end of this thing?' But that's exactly what I want." H

***LIFE IS BUT A DREAM...* IS OUT NOW VIA WARNER MUSIC GROUP**

CALIFORNIA DREAMIN'

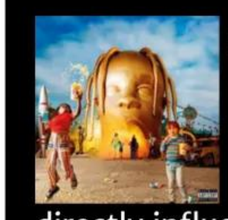
Five albums that influenced *Life Is But A Dream...*

A CHRISTMAS GIFT FOR YOU FROM PHIL SPECTOR (1963)
Various Artists
This holiday album was as much a showcase for producer Phil Spector's formidable 'Wall of Sound' as it was a collection of festive pop tunes performed by multiple artists. A time capsule that still reverberates in pop music, the recording would influence generations of acts, from The Beach Boys to Avenged Sevenfold. Like Vince Guaraldi's *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, the Spector record was played endlessly at A7X gatherings. "We'd study those things during the holidays," says Syn.

DISCO VOLANTE (1995)
Mr. Bungle
This experimental album led by singer Mike Patton [aka Vlad Drac] was a key influence on M. Shadows. The music is a noisy, gorgeous, uncompromising storm of death metal, free jazz, cha-cha, techno, vocal gibberish and more, with shifts in style and intensity. *Disco Volante* ['Flying Saucer' in Italian] ignores traditional song forms and is barely contained within its one hour and eight minutes. A shock to the system every time.

PINKERTON (1996)
Weezer
Alt rockers Weezer followed up their debut with this lo-fi, high-concept collection partly inspired by the opera *Madama Butterfly*, about a desperate search for love and sex. The songs are frequently awkward, euphoric, deeply personal and subversively tuneful. "That really fucked with me," says Shadows now. "I didn't get it for many years. Now it's like a North Star for me."

808s & HEARTBREAK (2008)
Kanye West
At the peak of his early fame in 2008, Kanye responded to personal tragedy with his strangest yet single most influential record. To sounds minimal and soulful, the acclaimed rapper stretched out as a vocalist by hardly rapping at all, instead singing throughout with robotic autotune effects. Its influence on *Life Is But A Dream...* is "huge", says Synyster Gates. "I love Kanye. I love hip hop."



ASTROWORLD (2018)
Travis Scott
This is hip hop layered with psychedelics and musical ambition, with opening track *Stargazing* declaring: '*Psychedelics got me goin' crazy (Oh, no).*' Of special interest to A7X was *Sicko Mode*, a three-part mini-epic that bounces through various flavours of hip hop, and directly influenced the band's three-part '*GOD*'. "I thought that was extremely creative," Shadows says of the record. "If we apply it to our genre, it's interesting."

FIVE MINUTES WITH

DANI FILTH

CRADLE OF FILTH

The macabre metal maestro talks witch cults, the next Cradle album and *that* Ed Sheeran team-up

WORDS: MATT MILLS

On St Patrick's Day, you posted a photo of you and Ed Sheeran in the pub. What's it like being BFFs with a pop star?
"Weird. I've spoken to him very regularly over the last two years. Like me, he's a real Suffolk boy. When he came to the studio that day [for our collaboration], he didn't come down with a cavalcade of reporters; he turned up on his own, guitar on his back, Cradle Of Filth hoodie on, and got on with it. It was fucking great."

Sounds good! Can you update us on the collaboration?
"Ed's done all his parts. It's just bass and vocals for me to do. It's exactly how you can imagine it'll sound, if you can imagine Ed Sheeran with Cradle Of Filth. He plays acoustic guitar on it, but it's heavy: it's got a blastbeat in there. It's a bit of everything. The plan is to do it as a charity single, because, first off, everybody jumped to the conclusion that we were doing this for the money and we wanted to knock that on the head. We're hoping for it to be out this summer."

It's an odd collab, especially for a band who once got blamed for trying to set fire to a church in Colchester…
"That was a long time ago! That church got burned down a long time before we got there. When we did a photoshoot there, we got harassed by a pitchfork-wielding mob. They were there because the church had been targeted [by arsonists] in the past. It was roofless because it had been burned down, allegedly by a witch cult."

Does your mum still have a crush on Tom Araya?
"She certainly does!"

What's the appeal?
"I don't know! I don't see it myself. I just know she does because I see Instagram accounts like 'Tom Araya lovers' and the first name I see is my mum's.

"ED SHEERAN PLAYS ACOUSTIC GUITAR BUT THERE'S A BLASTBEAT"

PRESS/JAMES SHARROCK

But, speaking of these weird familial juxtapositions, yesterday our guitar tech Anthony's family came down to a show and brought us a copy of [controversial 1975 Italian horror film] *Salò, Or The 120 Days Of Sodom*."

Is that a film you enjoy? It's a hard one to get through.
"It's a *very* hard film! I actually have a copy of it because one of our music videos [*Babalon A.D. (So Glad For The Madness)*] was based on it – loosely, thankfully. I've watched it once and the threat is that we'll watch it again on a day off, but we're trying to finish writing our current album while we're touring, so I think we'll put *Salò* on the backburner for now."

Tell us about the next Cradle album.
"We started recording the new album in May. We've got a few summer festivals but this year, at least until mid-September, is about the new album. We're just polishing off a few bits, but it's exciting! It's very modern, but it's also very *Dusk… And Her Embrace*. Our fans are gonna love it!"

Do you think your new single, *She Is A Fire*, is a good indication of how the next Cradle album will sound?
"It's not a million miles off by any means. We're not planning a total genre departure into ska or gabber [a type of EDM] any time soon!"

Are there any other horror films you're aching to pay tribute to in a Cradle clip?
"*Evil Dead, Hellraiser, The Wicker Man, The Masque Of The Red Death, Bram Stoker's Dracula, Possession, Martyrs, The Witch, Häxan, Invasion Of The Body Snatchers, Cannibal Holocaust, Dagon*… The list is pretty exhaustive, though it was the director's [Andrew 'WIZ' Whiston] idea for the *Babalon A.D.* video to honour *Salò*. He even wanted to fill dog bowls with the same mash of ingredients to emulate poo as in the movie, but we convinced him that that might be pushing boundaries a little too far."

Has there ever been a film that's too scary for you?
"There was a movie not so long ago which had a scene where people's eyes were getting burned out with red-hot pokers. I think it was a remake of *Wrong Turn*. That touched a nerve."

CRADLE OF FILTH'S NEW LIVE ALBUM, *TROUBLE AND THEIR DOUBLE LIVES*, IS OUT NOW VIA NAPALM

JEFF HANNEMAN

STILL REIGNING

2023 marked ten years since the death of Slayer's Jeff Hanneman, but his influence lives on. His bandmates and friends looked back at the man who gave thrash its edge

WORDS: JON WIEDERHORN

JEFF HANNEMAN

GETTY

For almost 30 years, Jeff Hanneman was a formidable presence at Slayer shows, standing stage right, wearing a black t-shirt or an Oakland Raiders jersey with camo shorts or athletic leg and shin guards. He never smiled. His blond, sweaty hair frequently obscured his face as he banged his head. His right hand was a blur as he sawed his pick back and forth on his guitar strings.

In his home studio, he cast even more rays of darkness across Slayer's insidious art, penning many of their most memorable songs, including *Angel Of Death, Raining Blood, Chemical Warfare, South Of Heaven, Dead Skin Mask* and *War Ensemble*, as well as writing the music for two Grammy award-winning tracks, *Eyes Of The Insane* and *Final Six*.

Offstage and between gigs, however, Jeff was barely heard from, avoiding fans and the press, and disappearing to his home in Hemet, California in Riverside County, 100 miles from Los Angeles, when Slayer weren't on tour.

"He wasn't big into fame," says former Slayer guitarist Kerry King, Jeff's six-string partner for 30 of the band's 38-year existence. "He didn't give a shit about being famous, so he could never really understand why anybody wanted to talk to him. He just wanted to do his thing."

That combination of dedication to the cause of Slayer and disdain for the spotlight earned Jeff the respect of many metal fans. As did the fact he was one of the architects of thrash, and a man who kept Slayer bristling with the intensity of hardcore punk long after many of their contemporaries had become more commercial.

"I love heavy, heavy music, but I'm super-into really good songs and Jeff was a great songwriter," says Blake Ibanez, former guitarist with Power Trip and currently of Fugitive. "The way he and Kerry played was super-tight and aggressive. And you can hear their influence in everything from crossover hardcore to death metal and black metal."

Kerry King was 17 when he first met Jeff Hanneman in a low-rent warehouse on the outskirts of Los Angeles. It was 1981, and Kerry was there to audition for a bunch of middle-aged rockers who needed a guitarist for their covers band, while Jeff, also 17, was working as the doorman for the building. As Kerry suffered through the audition, Jeff plugged a guitar into a practice amp in the lobby and began riffing away with the enthusiasm of someone who had been playing guitar for all of seven months.

"When I left, I saw Jeff and said, 'Hey, I know that song. Are you in a band?'" recalls Kerry. When the blond kid replied that he wasn't, Kerry asked if he *wanted* to be in a band? "Fuck yeah!" came the response.

The band Jeff had been recruited to was the nascent Slayer, featuring Kerry alongside bassist/vocalist Tom Araya and drummer Dave Lombardo. They played their first gig on Halloween 1981. Their set consisted of covers by Deep Purple and 70s rockers Montrose, as well as a trio of Judas Priest songs: *Genocide, Tyrant* and *Desert Plains*.

The musical chemistry between the two guitarists was undeniable from the beginning, even if they were coming at things from different directions. Kerry was into Judas Priest and Venom. By contrast, his new partner had been introduced to Black Sabbath by his sister, but it was a love of California punk that led him to write speedy riffs and unhinged solos filled with caterwauling whammy bar flurries.

"Soon after I met Jeff, he got really into West Coast punk like Adolescents and D.I.," says Kerry. "I couldn't understand that at the time because I didn't see the musical value in it. I got into it later, of course, but I had to play catch-up."

Together, they began writing original songs such as *Aggressive Perfector* and *Ice Titan* (whose ending was repurposed for the *Reign In Blood* track *Altar Of Sacrifice*). Their riffs were fast, tight and sharp as razor wire, while their leads resembled strangled cats – an approach that only intensified as the years passed.

"Jeff wrote really bizarre chromatic riffs that weren't built around traditional scale structures," says Exodus guitarist Gary Holt, who replaced Jeff in Slayer in 2011 after he became too sick to tour. "When I had to start learning these songs, I'd always do these little things wrong at first, because I was trying to learn them more in this traditional way. But after you get in his head, you start to figure out how he did these weird, cool things."

Jeff's offbeat, iconoclastic songwriting was an extension of his elusive personality. He didn't flow with the mainstream, and he didn't want to. But for a few years at least, he enjoyed hanging out and drinking with people he knew from the metal scene, especially musicians whose bands he liked.

"Man, Jeff was one of the coolest dudes once you got to know him," says Katon W. de Pena, frontman with thrash lifers Hirax, whose band Slayer opened for back when the latter still wore black eyeliner and red leather pants. "One night we were all partying downstairs at [ex-Metallica bassist] Ron McGovney's house, and Jeff just disappeared. So, I go upstairs to go to the bathroom and as I'm going up, I see Jeff passed out. I just stepped over him 'cos that's what we did back in those days. And he stayed there for the rest of the night."

As much as he enjoyed partying with his friends, Jeff was never especially sociable. After shows, he stayed backstage or in the band's van or bus until the crowd cleared out. He wasn't interested in signing autographs or doing interviews. He wasn't just shy, he was almost embarrassed by Slayer's growing success.

Jeff's anti-social tendencies may have been exacerbated by his strict father, who disciplined his youngest son whenever he misbehaved.

"I think that he had a pretty rough upbringing, so he was very guarded and shy, and it took a while for him to warm up to people," says Metal Blade Records founder and chairman/CEO Brian Slagel, who discovered Slayer when they opened for another Metal Blade band, Bitch, and subsequently signed them to his label.

When he wasn't with the band, Jeff enjoyed being with his girlfriend, Kathryn, whom he met at a Slayer show in 1983 after pulling her from the audience and passionately making out with her onstage. Soon after, Kathryn would pose as a bloodied woman by ravaged by the band in one of Slayer's first publicity photos; the pair would get married in Las Vegas in 1989. Jeff loved animals, played videogames, built models and spent much of his spare time watching American football, hockey and The History Channel. He also liked reading about World War II.

Kerry says he was the closest member of Slayer to his bandmate, but admits that none of them were fast friends and when they weren't on tour they rarely communicated.

"Jeff and I were like business partners," he told *Guitar World*. "Was he my friend? Of course he was my friend. But we didn't really act like that. It sounds horrible, but it wasn't horrible. That was just how it was."

Slayer's time on Metal Blade spanned three releases: the Judas-Priest-on-meth debut album *Show No Mercy* in December 1983, the following year's apocalyptic *Haunting The Chapel* EP, and the incendiary blasphemy of 1985's *Hell Awaits* album. Their burgeoning infamy in the metal underground saw them snapped up by Def Jam, the hip hop label founded by producer/music-mogul-in-the-making Rick Rubin.

Slayer in the late 1980s (left to right): Dave Lombardo, Kerry King, Jeff Hanneman, Tom Araya

"HE DIDN'T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT BEING FAMOUS"

KERRY KING

Their first album for their new label would be the one that sealed their notoriety. *Reign In Blood* was a violent, 28-minute blast of noise and energy. It was surrounded by controversy even before it was released, due to its opening track, the Hanneman-penned *Angel Of Death*. The song, which graphically chronicles the sadistic medical experiments of Nazi surgeon Josef Mengele at the Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II, prompted Def Jam distributor Columbia Records to refuse to handle the album (Geffen Records eventually stepped in to release it).

The guitarist's fascination with the macabre had long been part of Slayer's DNA, but his most enduring obsession was with the Third Reich. Long before he wrote *Angel Of Death*, Jeff named the band's fan club 'Slatanic Wehrmacht' after the WWII-era German armed forces. He collected Nazi memorabilia, named his pets after German war figureheads, and even modelled his wedding right after that of Reinhard Heydrich, a decorated SS officer and a principal architect of the Holocaust. He owned hundreds of books about Nazi Germany and decorated the frets of one of his guitars with the double lightning bolt logo of the SS.

To some, this interest was inexplicable and unhealthy. But for Jeff himself, delving into and filtering through the messy history of the Holocaust and other atrocities was an inspiring study of the darkness within mankind. When I spoke to him in 2010, he denied that he was celebrating the Nazis and everything they stood for.

"I've got some German World War II artefacts and a lot of people don't understand it," he said. "They say, 'Why would you have that in your house?' But it's cool. It's evil. It's part of what being in Slayer is. And it's a major part of history. It doesn't mean I'm a Nazi, because I'm not. But some people believe what they want to."

He added that he had been approached more than once by members of far right organisations who mistakenly saw him as one of their own. "I've had three occasions over the years where somebody will go, 'Pssst, hey! I'm part of this Aryan World Nation group and we're thinking of having you speak.' And I'm like, 'Why?' And they'll go, 'Aren't you...?' And I'm like, 'What?! No. Go away. You don't get me at all.'"

Perhaps the key to understanding this fascination with one of the darkest periods in history lies in his upbringing in working-class Oakland, California. His German-American father fought on the beaches of Normandy in World War II, and brought home medals taken from the bodies of dead German soldiers, many of which he gave to Jeff. The guitarist's older brothers, Michael and Larry, fought in Vietnam and the family often talked about war at the dinner table. Exposure to violent imagery from an early age made the young Jeff curious about war and obsessed with mortality.

"I used to think about dying a lot, all the time," he said. "Even as a kid, I didn't buy into the whole religious thing. I thought when you're dead, that's it, which was scary. I was like, 'What, no more *me*? No more ice cream? No more nothing?' I guess I did that so much as a kid that I got used to it."

GETTY

Jeff and Kerry slaying onstage in Noblesville, Indiana in 2009

The success of *Reign In Blood* and the albums that followed – 1988's *South Of Heaven* and 1990's *Seasons In The Abyss* – drew more attention to Slayer. Jeff would get recognised in and around Los Angeles even when he was just hanging out with friends, something that irked the guitarist.

He and his wife moved out of Los Angeles to Hemet, where they had more land and privacy, and Jeff started coming to band practice with songs fully demoed. He'd make the 90-minute trek to Tom Araya's garage four to six times a week to practice, but he and Kerry no longer collaborated the way they had when they wrote the band's first five albums.

"Driving that far almost every day will wear on you," Kerry says. "It became a big bummer, so as time went by, Jeff showed up less and less at Tom's. So, I'd do my songs on my own and he'd do his. It didn't bother me. My attitude was, 'If someone else finished it, great. Now I don't have to do it. It's a great song, good for you. Now, let's play it.'"

Slayer released three more albums throughout the 1990s, each of which charted in the US Top 50. The guitarist remained in fine songwriting form for 2001's *God Hates Us All*, 2006's *Christ Illusion* and 2009's *World Painted Blood*, and his onstage chemistry with Kerry was as strong as ever. But he had been drinking more and more, and by the mid-00s his alcohol intake had reached the point where he would hit the bottle as soon as he woke up.

The death of his father in 2008 hit him hard, while his physical health was affected by his heavy alcohol use causing uric acid build-up, which worsened a progressive arthritis problem he battled in 2009 and 2010. He was already losing playing speed and coordination before the event in January 2011 that would be a factor in his death.

While relaxing in a jacuzzi, Jeff was bitten by what is believed to have been a highly venomous brown recluse spider. Soon after, he developed the 'flesh-eating' bacterial infection necrotising fasciitis, which rapidly spread through his arm and became life-threatening. Doctors put him into an induced coma and operated to prevent the infection from spreading to his vital organs. They were able to save his life and arm, and, he hoped, his career. After more surgeries, staples and skin grafts, he returned home and tried to rehearse again with Slayer.

"He wanted nothing more than to come back and be onstage and perform," says Kerry. "And he was progressing, but not far enough to where he could nail the fast stuff. We were like, 'Listen dude. Everyone wants you to be playing with us, but we gotta have you performing at the level that everybody's used to seeing you at.'"

Jeff's final appearance with Slayer was at a Big 4 show in Indio, California on April 23, 2011, when he took the stage to play *Angel Of Death* and *South Of Heaven*. The crowd was ecstatic, and fans hoped the performance would mark the first step towards a full return to the band.

Behind the scenes, the guitarist's bandmates tried to convince him that even if he couldn't play well enough to perform, he could still write Slayer songs while he was recovering. But for Jeff Hanneman, it was all or nothing. When he realised he would never recover enough to make a proper return to the stage, he gave up.

"It was terrible, but you can kind of understand it," says Metal Blade's Brian Slagel. "Being in Slayer was Jeff's identity from when he was 17, and to have that taken away in such an odd manner, there was just no way to fix it."

Messages and texts from the Slayer camp to the guitarist frequently went unanswered, and the distance between the two parties began to grow. Yet Kerry says that neither he nor Tom gave up on Jeff eventually turning a corner and rejoining the band. The latter even sent Tom a song he had been working on, and the two began exchanging texts. Then the messages stopped and the singer learned that his friend was back in hospital for what would be the last time.

"I was home with my family when I found out he had died," Tom told *Guitar World*. "The phone rang, and my wife answered it, and she had this look of dread on her face. She handed me the phone and didn't say anything, and it was our manager, Rick [Sales], and he told me. I hung up the phone and went to my room and I cried."

"WE ALWAYS THOUGHT HE WOULD COME BACK"

KERRY KING

"It's crazy because he was actually getting better," Kerry says now. "Personally, I think that had he gone forward for a couple more weeks and not been drinking, maybe he would have gotten back to where he needed to be to do an entire Slayer show again. We always thought he would come back. It just never materialised."

Jeff Hanneman died as a result of liver failure on May 2, 2013, in his hometown of Hemet, California. He was 49. Members of Metallica, Megadeth, Anthrax, Disturbed, Fall Out Boy and countless others paid tribute, as did the Oakland Raiders, his favourite American Football team.

Two years later, Slayer released their 12th, and final, studio album, *Repentless*. The music was largely written by Kerry King, though it did feature one Jeff Hanneman song, *Piano Wire*. While it was a solid offering, it lacked the late guitarist's unsettling touch. The band played their last-ever show on November 30, 2019, with Gary Holt once more taking Jeff's place, as he had for the previous eight years.

"I didn't know what was going on at home with Jeff the whole time I was in Slayer," says Gary of his stint with the band. "I had no idea. The band was like, 'We still need you,' and I thought, 'Alright, I'm having fun here and keeping the seat warm for you. C'mon back.' And then, you know, I got the news that he passed away."

Today, 10 years after his death, Jeff Hanneman remains instantly recognisable but unknowable. Yet the music he made with Slayer has ensured his place in the metal pantheon, his songs and attitude embedded deep with metal's DNA.

"By all accounts, he was the band," Tom Araya told *Guitar World* in 2014. "I'm amazed at how many people he touched. They hardly knew him, but he affected a lot of people. And he didn't even realise it."

GETTY

The man, the legend.
Jeff Hanneman in 2007

GETTY

BLONDE AMBITION

If Barbie went metal, she'd sound like gatekeeper-baiting 'bimbocore' heroine Scene Queen. In July, we jumped into her unique world

WORDS: EMILY SWINGLE • PICTURES: PAIGE MARGULIES

PRESS/PAIGE MARGULIES

It's March 2020, and Hannah Collins is sitting in the garage of her family home in Ohio. It's the start of the pandemic and there's a sense of alienation eating away at her – a longing to connect with other people, to immerse herself in the comfort of community.

She turns to TikTok. Despite only having seven followers, she props up her phone on a garbage can and begins dancing. Over the next few days and weeks, she begins posting religiously in the hope of finding more people like herself, people desperate to bond over their love of the alt scene. Little does she know that she's about to open up an entirely new world.

Today, Hannah goes under the name Scene Queen and those initial TikTok posts have turned into something much bigger. Serving up rhinestone-encrusted riffs, bubblegum-infused breakdowns and bubbling hyperpop, she's pioneered her own unique brand of Barbie-pink metalcore she calls 'bimbocore' – a balancing act of sugar, spice and reluctance to be nice.

"Listening to Motionless In White and the Spice Girls made me what I am," she says. "Bimbocore is metal theatrics plus the pop princesses."

Scene Queen's unlikely combination of in-your-face music and hot-pink persona deliberately challenges metal's deep-rooted machismo. It's provocative, and she knows it.

"Some people will be like, 'Oh, that's not what metal is!' and I'm like, 'I know. That's the *point*. That's why it's funny!'" she says. "Scene Queen is the most amplified version of myself, and the whole project is kind of making fun of that. How can people even be mad at something that is clearly poking fun?"

Scene Queen is pissing off the haters, and loving it

PRESS/PAIGE MARGULIES

Born in New York, Hannah's introduction to music came when she was young, via her older sister's love of early-00s emo. Her own heroes were 'scene' bands like Pierce The Veil, Sleeping With Sirens and Motionless In White.

"I'm starstruck by literally everything," she admits. "I was that kid in high school where I wouldn't just look up to the bandmembers – I would want to get autographs from, like, their lighting guy."

That fandom extended to wanting to be part of the music industry herself. She set up a Tumblr account in high school and twice unsuccessfully applied for an internship at punk/emo label Hopeless Records (ironically, the label that would sign her as Scene Queen). But by the mid-2010s, she was becoming disillusioned with everything around her.

"I actually left the alt music scene in 2016," she admits. "I was so tired, I just didn't feel like there was a place for women in it."

"BIMBOCORE IS METAL THEATRICS PLUS THE POP PRINCESSES"

Instead, she focused her songwriting on pop, R'n'B and Latin music, something she weaves into what she does now. After her pandemic-inspired lightbulb moment, she released her debut single, *Are You Tired?*, at the end of 2020 under the name RØSÉ.

"It was because rosé wine is sweet, it sparkles, but it fucks you up if you have too much of it," she says. But it was when the Scene Queen concept came into play soon after that Hannah truly came into herself. "It was just perfect and it fit the project so much better," she says.

Early Scene Queen singles *Pink Bubblegum* and *Pink Rover* went viral, thanks in part to her growing TikTok following.

"I was quickly able to connect with my people, people who want to rebel against the scene," she says. Those releases were followed by the song *Pink Panther* and the *Bimbocore* EP in April 2022, plus *Bimbocore Vol. 2* seven months later.

Scene Queen has struck a chord with the LGBTQ+ community. Hannah's bisexuality is worn on her fluffy pink sleeve, endlessly and explicitly explored throughout her music. Yet while she purposefully pushes the envelope, seeing just how racy her hyper-sexual lyrics can become, her vulgar tone is offset by a constant thread of giggling, comic exaggeration, from *Pink Panther* playfully soundtracking the act of mass shower cunnilingus all the way to *Pink G-String*'s resourceful promise to use a thong as dental floss (she makes a point of fitting the word 'pink' into as many songs as she can as an act of defiance against the metal scene's gatekeepers, which has thrown up ridiculous yet brilliant titles such as *Pink Cocaine* and *The Rapture (But It's Pink)*).

Her recent single *18+* mercilessly took aim at the scene's kick-it-under-the-carpet attitude towards the grooming of teenage fans.

"I was once that 16-year-old fighting to hang out in the tour bus with band dudes in their late 20s," she says. "Sometimes I feel emotional because I get DMs from young mums saying, 'I'm gonna make sure that my daughter never has to experience what I went through in the scene.' So many bands reach out to me just being like, 'Thank you for doing this, I'm so tired of having to silently kick bands off of tours.'"

The clash between her hyper-sparkly persona and such serious topics may seem unlikely, but there's a raw feminine rage at the heart of what she does. Whether it's *18+*'s

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focused condemnation of music business perverts or *Pink Rover*'s enraged, phallus-chopping venom, Scene Queen vocalises the shared fears of women within the scene.

"My whole schtick is delivering hard-to-digest topics with a sense of humour," she says. "At least it gets people talking."

It does more than that. Everything from her music and lyrics to her persona and even her name have the capacity to rile a certain kind of person - specifically ones who can't deal with an outspoken woman in the middle of 'their' scene.

"Nothing I say is actually that controversial," Hannah asserts, "but everything I say has so much intense backlash."

The judgement she has faced reflects underlying aversions to hyper-femininity in heavier spaces.

"Recently I've been getting more tattoos, but I try and hide them when I perform, because I feel like if I looked more 'alternative' people would never be mad about anything I was doing. Because I look the way I do, it's as if certain people can't process that it's a joke."

Rather than back off from the online hate, she feeds on it. With every disapproving glare, Scene Queen only amps up the hyper-femme sparkle, feeding on every bark of objection and every disapproving glare. For every person that doesn't connect with Scene Queen, there are dozens who do – something her online presence has helped with.

"If I was playing at random festivals and trying to grow organically, playing to misogynistic crowds or people that just didn't get it, it would have been so much harder to forge a community," she says.

But just as any kind of viral success comes with a pushback, her online following is so strong that there's a pushback to the pushback. "With that influx comes a lot of hate, because people don't understand you yet," Hannah explains. "Luckily I've developed an intensely protective fanbase just as quickly."

The last couple of years have been a whirlwind for Hannah Collins. Scene Queen's seven original TikTok followers have swollen to almost a quarter of a million. Her very first UK headlining tour sold out in 24 hours.Her full-length debut album is due out later this year.

"I don't even know how to manage my expectations any more," she says with a laugh. "Being Scene Queen has just given me so much confidence - it's the best superpower. If I'm nervous I'm like, 'Nope, I'm Scene Queen now.' Hannah's shitting her pants, but Scene Queen is totally cool with it."

More than anything, the success of Scene Queen has proved to Hannah that there's a space for girls like her.

"I want to be as loud as possible," she says. "I'm excited for the next generation of young women in music. I want any girl that wants to do this in five years to do it with absolutely no backlash. I'm fully comfortable being in the line of fire to make that possible." H

SCENE QUEEN'S DEBUT STUDIO ALBUM IS SET FOR RELEASE TOWARDS THE END OF 2023. FOR FURTHER UPDATES, HEAD TO WWW.METALHAMMER.COM

"EVERYTHING I SAY RECEIVES AN INTENSE BACKLASH"

All together now: *'She's a Barbie girl, in a metal world...'*

PRESS/PAIGE MARGULIES

SCENE QUEEN MATHS

The albums that shaped her sound

KESHA – ANIMAL (2010)
"People say I sound like her. I love her."

+

THE READY SET – I'M ALIVE, I'M DREAMING 2010)
"I love that neon-emo sound."

+

BRING ME THE HORIZON – SEMPITERNAL (2013)
"It made me want to learn how to scream!"

FIVE MINUTES WITH DINO CAZARES FEAR FACTORY

The industrial metal pioneer on partying with Hetfield, turning down Bizkit and the future of Fear Factory

WORDS: MATT MILLS

Burton C. Bell left Fear Factory in 2020, and this year you announced a new singer, Milo Silvestro. What's the mood in the camp right now?
"It's a very good time to be in the band. We've done more than 50 shows with him and every day I pinch myself, look over at him and go, 'Wow, this kid can really sing!' People are loving him."

Before you found Milo, you said you were open to both male and female singers. Did any women get close to getting the job?
"Yes, a couple of women got really close. But, at the end of the day, I needed that one person who could really take Fear Factory to that next level, and I felt that Milo was that person. I could have gotten some well-known singer, but that singer would have already had their own voice that people know. I wanted to try something new, something fresh."

Speaking of auditions, you were once offered the chance to audition for Limp Bizkit and replace Wes Borland. Why did you turn it down?
"Because it was in 2001, and I felt that that style of nu metal had already hit its peak. Limp Bizkit's [sound] was already oversaturated and on its way down. I said, 'If I actually got that gig, it would have been career suicide.' Fear Factory, we were pretty much at our peak. And it's funny because, two years later, I was out of Fear Factory [he returned in 2009]."

You hung out with Faith No More a lot while recording 1995's *Demanufacture*. Any fun stories with those guys?
"I first met Jim Martin, their original guitar player, in 1988. I met James Hetfield at the same time, too – they used to come to my apartment to get hammered and sing Misfits at the top of their lungs. When we were making *Demanufacture*, Billy [Gould, Faith No More's bassist] would come over to our parties."

Weren't Bon Jovi recording next door to you?
"Bon Jovi had the other room and Faith No More had the barn outside. One time, our keyboard player, Rhys Fulber, is on a payphone, and a guy walks past who he thinks is a runner. He says, 'Hey, can you go to the deli and pick me up a ham and turkey? Hold the mustard, extra mayo.' Someone walks over to Rhys and goes, 'That's Jon Bon Jovi! What the fuck are you doing?!' Ha ha!"

"I THOUGHT, 'WHO WANTS TO SHOOT ME?'"

PRESS/STEPHANIE CABRAL

You once tweeted in defence of Kourtney Kardashian wearing a Cannibal Corpse t-shirt and said, 'I wish she was wearing one of my band's tees.' Does Fear Factory have any famous fans?
"I've never seen somebody like Travis Barker or any of the Kardashians wear our stuff, but famous people like Kirk Hammett and James Hetfield, basically all the guys in Metallica, have said, 'We love what you've been doing and we love your records.' They took us on tour with them in 2010. I can't say we influenced them, because it was vice versa: they were a huge influence on us!"

You also tweeted a photo of your car's windscreen with a bullet lodged in it. What happened?!
"There was a park about a quarter of a mile from my house. Apparently there were some homeless people in the park and one of them had a gun. They shot in the air and it happened to come down on my car. Where my car was parked, there was a neighbour with a couple of kids who played in that area. I thought, 'Man, it's good the kids weren't back here!' My second thought was, 'Who the fuck wants to shoot me?!' Ha ha! The investigators asked if I had any enemies and I gave them some names… three."

Do you have more or less enemies nowadays?
"Less. I made up with one of them – unless he's just pretending to be my friend so he can get close enough to shoot me. Ha ha!"

Are there any plans for a new Fear Factory album?
"Oh, 100%! In the middle of July, we will be going in [to the studio] to do the new record. There will be a new song out before we hit the UK later this year."

FEAR FACTORY TOUR THE UK IN OCTOBER AND NOVEMBER. THEIR NEW REMIX ALBUM, *RECODED*, IS OUT NOW VIA NUCLEAR BLAST

LORD OF THE LOST

When Lord Of The Lost brought metal to Eurovision, it put them in front of millions. They'd bomb when it came to the votes, but hey...

WHO NEEDS EUROVISION ANYWAY?

PRESS/CORINNE CUMMING

WORDS: RICH HOBSON

LORD OF THE LOST

Somewhere in The Vatican is a butt plug with Lord Of The Lost frontman Chris Harms's face on it. He knows this because he sent it.

"We sell them as 'paperweights' because you can't sell sex toys without a different kind of merch store," explains Chris. "But we didn't sell them to the Pope – we sent them. I wanted the guys in The Vatican to – pun intended – open up. We sent them with tracking numbers and insurance. We know they got there, we just don't know what happened with them."

Lord Of The Lost are very much the kind of band you'd expect to send sex toys to the home of the Catholic Church. The German band's industrial/goth metal hybrid sound and flamboyant, fetish-adjacent imagery is designed to get them noticed. It's worked – they're stars in their homeland and across the rest of Europe, while the UK and USA is catching up. They've caught the attention of Iron Maiden's Steve Harris, who invited them to support his band, and even met the recently crowned King Charles III.

And then there's Eurovision. In what could be the weirdest moment of the year so far, Lord Of The Lost were picked to be Germany's official entry in the final of the 2023 edition of the long-running pop contest. Their song, the electro-glam metal stomp of *Blood & Glitter*, stood out like, well, a butt plug in the Vatican. It begs the question: how the hell does a bunch of feather-sporting, PVC-clad Germans go from opening for Iron Maiden to appearing at Eurovision?

"It's a long story," says Chris with a chuckle.

Buy Lord Of The Lost's merch! Maybe then Chris will be able to afford the other trouser leg...

It's a few days before the Eurovision final when *Hammer* meets Lord Of The Lost in Liverpool. Just over a week ago, they were touring South America. Last night, they rehearsed in front of a sold-out audience at the M&S Bank Arena, where the finals are being held in a few days' time. The band have been fielding interviews almost nonstop for months. They'd done 500 before they even arrived in Liverpool. "It must be around 666 by this point," jokes Chris.

The band are understandably knackered, though they aren't letting it show as they sit in a boardroom in the Aloft hotel. Chris has swapped his stage regalia for a tracksuit top and jeans, though the flicks of eyeliner and neon-bright knee-high rainbow legwarmers betray the sense of flair he's had since his days working as a barman in Hamburg gay club ABSOLUT as an 18-year-old in the late 1990s.

"I was the only heterosexual working there, but it was completely my world because I could work topless with blue hair and no eyebrows, lots of make-up," he says.

That sense of flamboyance was in place when Chris formed Lord Of The Lost in 2007 at the age of 27. He'd already played in a series of bands ranging from industrial rock outfit Philae to glam metallers The Pleasures, but he wanted his own project. He began working on songs at home in Hamburg's vibrant St Pauli district.

These demos were released on MySpace under the name LORD, a nickname other kids at school had for him. After signing with German label Out Of Line, he assembled a band and rechristened the project Lord Of The Lost to avoid confusion with other bands who had Lord in their name.

Lord Of The Lost released their debut album, *Fears*, in 2010. Since then, their music has taken onboard everything from disco to the glam edge of 2022's *Blood & Glitter* (their eighth studio album). Similarly, their image has gone from standard-issue black jeans and white vests, through to post-apocalyptic vampire chic circa 2016's *Empyrean*, to the 'albino Satanic monks' look of 2021's *Judas*, up to today's peacocks-let-loose-in-an-S&M-club clobber.

"Our only constant has been change," says Chris of the band's musical and visual approach. He lists the artists that have influenced him: David Bowie, Rammstein, Abba, Cradle Of Filth, 90s Swedish pop-rockers Roxette. "I still listen to Lady Gaga and Cradle Of Filth back to back in my car."

Predictably, metal and goth gatekeepers haven't always embraced their look or their sound.

"It doesn't hurt me anymore when somebody goes 'You look too gay' or 'You're too colourful'," Chris adds. "There must be a reason it bothers them so much. Yes, we *are* different and proud of the fact."

In any case, Lord Of The Lost's detractors are outweighed by the people who do like them. Every album they've released since *Empyrean* has reached the Top 10 in Germany, with *Blood & Glitter* hitting No.1. In 2022, they were hand-picked by Steve Harris to open for Iron Maiden in Europe after he saw the videos for their songs *Black Halo* and *On This Rock I Will Build My Church*.

"Nearly every night we spent some time with him just chatting," Chris says of the Maiden bassist. "He's such an inspiration and so humble; just there with his cargo shorts, metal shirts and trekking shoes. This man helped invent heavy metal as we know it. He's always polite, giving you great advice then always adding, 'But what do I know?' It's like 'Yes, Steve, what *do* you know?!' If anyone knows how things work in metal, I think it's Steve Harris."

It's unlikely that 'Arry could have foreseen just how weird their journey to Eurovision would be. They spent a decade unsuccessfully trying to enter the competition to represent Germany at the finals. This time around, the rules were changed to include a broader range of genres and, earlier this year, Lord Of The Lost finally got their shot. Unexpectedly, *Blood & Glitter* trounced various schmaltzy ballads and slick R'n'B tunes to win Unser Lied für Liverpool

PRESS/SARAH LOUISE BENNETT

Pah! These guys were wasted on Eurovision!

"I WAS THE ONLY HETEROSEXUAL WORKING IN A GAY BAR"

CHRIS HARMS

('A Song For Liverpool'). Shortly afterwards, as Germany's official Eurovision entry, they got to meet King Charles during his first state visit to Germany as British monarch. Chris and his bandmates were in full stage gear at the time.

"He wanted to know where we got our costumes from," recalls the singer. Sadly, he doesn't add if he sent a butt plug with his face on it to Buckingham Palace.

It's barely 8am when *Hammer* arrives at The Cavern Club, but a queue is already snaking down the street. This iconic venue is where The Beatles played their earliest gigs. Today, it's hosting a Lord Of The Lost acoustic set.

At the front of the queue is Laurence. He won't say exactly what time he arrived, only that it was "stupid early". Behind him, fellow devotees Hannah and Matt reveal that they arrived at 6.20am. Further back, we spot somebody dressed in a homemade version Chris's current stage outfit. This is Jerome. Surprisingly, he's not a hardcore fan.

"I'd never heard of them before Eurovision," admits Jerome, who travels from his native Germany to watch Eurovision every year. "But I really like their message, to be there for the lost people, the ones who feel like they don't have a place."

Inside, The Cavern is packed with a mixture of black-clad metalheads and neon-sporting Eurovision fans. Even without their costumes and pyro, Lord Of The Lost are hugely entertaining. Chris cracks jokes and leads the crowd through singalongs. Danny Estrin, vocalist in Australia's Eurovision finalists Voyager, makes a surprise appearance. "Heavy music at Eurovision this year… it's gonna be big!" he proclaims to cheers of approval.

The next time we see the band it's the day before the Eurovision final. They're being ushered onstage at the M&S Bank Arena as part of a six-hour rehearsal ahead of the big night. It's a gruelling and meticulously planned operation, but for the three minutes Lord Of The Lost are on the stage, still dressed down but with jets of flame spouting around them, it feels like they're in with a chance of winning.

"We often get the question: 'Why do you guys need Eurovision when you can tour with Iron Maiden?'" says Chris when we catch up with the band later. "And the answer is… they're *very* different audiences. Just because you have one, doesn't mean you don't need the other."

Not only are they very different audiences, they're very different experiences.

"With Eurovision, everything is marked down to the second," Chris says. "We had to go frame by frame through the show before the rehearsals, checking every camera position, everything. It's like a live music video shoot in front of 160 million viewers."

PRESS/CORINNE CUMMING

Lord Of The Lost (left to right): Pi Stoffers, Class Grenayde, Niklas Kahl, Gared Dirge, Chris Harms

At the same time, the singer admits he has few complaints about being here.

"I remember watching with my parents every year, being blown away by everything that was happening onstage," he says. "I knew I wanted to be on that stage. So for me, this is fulfilling a childhood dream."

Two weeks later, we catch up with Chris on Zoom. Sadly, despite an eye-catching performance, Lord Of The Lost weren't able to reverse Germany's dire recent Eurovision showings. They finished last with just 18 points, though at least they improved on the six points last year's entrant, Malik Harris, received. Yet Chris insists he isn't disheartened by the result.

"Everyone's expecting us to grieve the outcome, but we came as ambassadors for heavy music at Eurovision, so we did our job," he says. Still, he does concede that the post-show press conference in front of the German media was tough.

"Nobody was mad, but they all looked so sad. You have to explain to them: 'It is what it is, thank you for all the support.' After that, nobody was in the party mood, so we went back to the hotel."

That Eurovision-shaped cloud has a sizable silver lining. Lord Of The Lost's streaming stats have exploded since they were announced as Germany's entrants earlier this year, rocketing from 300,000 monthly Spotify listeners in March to 1.8 million in the days after the final.

The band have plenty to keep themselves occupied in the coming months, too. There's a run of European festival appearances in the summer, and they'll once again be supporting Iron Maiden at the latter's UK gigs in June and July, before returning to this side of the English Channel for their own headlining shows in September. However, it does mean the singer won't have as much time to spend at home with the orphaned kittens he and his family adopted from Poland during the pandemic.

PRESS

"WE'RE NOT AN ACT THAT WAS BUILT FOR EUROVISION"

CHRIS HARMS

"Their mother had been run over," he says. "We called one Piwo, which is Polish for beer."

And beyond that? According to Chris, the Eurovision adventure was just the latest step on the never-knowingly-uneventful journey that is Lord Of The Lost's career – a journey that could take them literally anywhere.

"I don't know what the future looks like, because we've got so much still to do," Chris says. "But we're not an act that was built for Eurovision that will just vanish afterwards, we'll just keep going. Besides, I loved the experience. Even if I knew we would come last, we'd take part again."

Whether they're asked back remains to be seen. For now, there are shows to play, PVC costumes to wipe down and butt plugs to post.

***BLOOD & GLITTER* IS OUT NOW.**
FOR MORE FUTURE NEWS ON LORD OF THE LOST, STAY TUNED TO WWW.METALHAMMER.COM

VOYAGER: PRESS

"DANNII MINOGUE CAME TO ONE OF OUR SHOWS!"

Australia's Voyager were the other band repping metal in this year's Eurovision

CONGRATULATIONS ON COMING 10TH IN EUROVISION 2023!
Danny Estrin (vocals): "It's been so phenomenal, I have to pinch myself. Obviously we've been at it for a while – we've got seven albums and have toured all over the place, but this much exposure was exactly what we needed."

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE A METAL BAND AT THE EUROVISION SONG CONTEST?
"Metal and Eurovision go hand-in-hand more than people think. People might think its kitschy or cheesy, but you're missing out on this incredible event full of staging, lighting, performances... Metal is theatre, so representing heavy music alongside Lord Of The Lost, showing two very different sides of the genre, was great."

HOW DID YOU PERSONALLY FIND THE EXPERIENCE?
"It's a marathon, for sure, but hands down it's the best thing we've ever done as musicians and artists."

HAVE YOU EARNED ANY SURPRISING FANS FROM THE CONTEST?
"We got to be pretty good mates with Rylan [Clark], the Radio 2 presenter. He's an absolute champion and we spent a lot of time just shooting the breeze and partying. Dannii Minogue came to one of our shows... crazy stuff! You can't believe you're running into people like Graham Norton in the hallway and end up chatting."

THERE'S A NEW VOYAGER ALBUM OUT IN JULY. WHAT CAN WE EXPECT FROM IT?
"I reckon people will like it – older fans as well as the people who've come in through Eurovision, because there's something for everyone there. It's great to already have that set up and good to go, too – I think trying to write something from scratch right now would be really difficult!"

VOYAGER'S NEW ALBUM, *FEARLESS IN LOVE*, IS OUT NOW VIA SEASON OF MIST

BACK TO THE

Fan-favourite deep cuts, all-star football matches and a giant cyborg Eddie? Iron Maiden were back on the road in style this year – and we got to go to Prague with them

WORDS: MERLIN ALDERSLADE • PICTURES: JOHN McMURTRIE

FUTURE

Bruce Dickinson is excitedly waving a bow and arrow around in the bowels of Prague's O2 Arena. As he's doing it, he's explaining the mechanics of the big, fuck-off machine-gun he's going to aim at a 10-foot cyborg live onstage in about an hour's time.

"It's just making sure the band don't forget to move," he says nonchalantly, outlining his tactical approach to ensuring he doesn't blow his bandmates to smithereens later. If he had anything to do with it, the cyborg would be even more OTT than it is. "I originally said, 'Can we have flames coming out of it?'" he says, grinning. "But they said no!"

We're standing in a corridor deep within this 20,000-capacity venue, where Maiden are about to play the second date on their current The Future Past Tour. Beside him, bassist Steve Harris is casually chatting to one of the band's management team about his beloved West Ham's chances in the upcoming Europa Conference League final that will be taking place just up the road in a little over a week's time. In the background, drummer and class clown Nicko McBrain darts between doors in his pyjamas like he's on the run from a *Scooby-Doo* villain.

Unlike the gun, the bow and arrow Bruce is currently wielding won't be making an appearance tonight. It's actually a gift from a Maiden fan.

"Some local guy that makes serious bloody bows," clarifies the singer, looking match fit and dressed in a shirt, shorts and camo baseball cap. "I did once spend a long weekend in the woods in Suffolk making longbows," he adds, playfully holding the weapon up and aiming it down the corridor.

"I had better take that off you," advises a roadie gently.

Maiden are here to play the first of two consecutive shows in the capital of the Czech Republic. Prague itself is awash with fans – you can barely walk 10 yards around the city's Old Town without passing a shirt featuring the band's iconic mascot, Eddie.

Tonight's gig is the second stop on Maiden's The Future Past Tour, celebrating 2021's critically acclaimed *Senjutsu* record while also resurrecting some deep cuts and aesthetics from 1986's futuristic *Somewhere In Time*. It's a mash-up that poses some challenges; Bruce claims he has to sing no fewer than "3,000 lyrics" each night. He begins reciting *Somewhere In Time* album closer *Alexander The Great* – a song they've never played live – right in front of us as his eyes glaze over like some demented beat poet. Whatever happens, this show is going to be something else.

Bounty hunter Bruce on the hunt for a worthy audience

Steve's still got the moves!

Prague is the perfect place to evaluate Iron Maiden in 2023. It's a city filled with rich history, yet one that feels vibrant, alive and very much existing in the now.

Maiden arrive here at a fascinating point in their careers. Two decades into metal's greatest third act, they're riding high on the back of a critically acclaimed new album, one that they're gagging to play live, yet remain unafraid to celebrate their past while doing so. It's what's led to this unique tour; there's no notable anniversary for *Somewhere In Time* or flashy reissue to plug. They just fancied digging out some classics and revamping one of their most celebrated stage shows.

"We hadn't hit on that stuff for quite some time," Steve Harris later tells us, matter-of-factly. "So it just felt right to do something a bit left-field."

It's resulted in a setlist that's had Maiden fans drooling over their keyboards since it was revealed at the tour's opening gig a couple of days ago, and the excitement in the air as UFO's *Doctor Doctor* – the song that traditionally heralds that things are about to kick off – rings out over the O2 Arena's PA before the first of the two Prague gigs is palpable. Fans of every age, gender and creed are in attendance tonight – veterans who were at the original Somewhere On Tour trek in the 80s, young fans eager to see some of those songs played for the first time in their lives. It's what most marks Maiden out among so many of their peers; where other metal OGs have fanbases that have aged with them, there's something about the timeless escapism of Maiden's music that crosses generations, making era-hopping shows like these the perfect coming together.

Soon, strips of neon lighting burst into life, bathing the arena in hues of greens and blues as Vangelis's *Blade Runner* theme, the intro music for this tour, begins to play. Then, those screeching opening notes of *Caught Somewhere In Time* peel out, Britain's favourite six-man heavy metal wrecking crew gallop out onstage, and we're off to the races.

If Bruce's backstage attire is understated, his fancy dress for tonight is typically on point: decked out in patchwork jeans, a long, green trench coat and goggled sunglasses, he evokes the sci-fi bounty hunter Eddie on the original *Somewhere In Time* cover. His voice – richer and heavier in tone as it's evolved over the years – sounds fantastic.

He and his bandmates are flanked by glistening LCD screens featuring two animated Eddies, one from *Somewhere In Time* (think an *Evil Dead* deadite crossed with RoboCop) and his *Senjutsu* descendent (a vampiric, undead monstrosity in samurai gear). In front of a DeLorean-esque backdrop, a crunching *Stranger In A Strange Land* follows, and we already get our first glimpse of Eddie in the flesh, dressed in his *Stranger...* trench coat and Stetson as he sneaks out to leer over his chums.

"'Ello!" beams Bruce, directly addressing Prague for the first time. "Welcome to the Somewhere Back In Time...

Seriously? Who let Bruce near this kind of ordnance?!

A real Trooper of a crowd

“BRUCE WAS READY FOR THE FUNNY FARM”

STEVE HARRIS

whatever… tour.” He pauses, laughing, realising his gaff. “Oh, I dunno!”

As well as a set packing super-rare cuts, 10-minute epics and beloved classics, there are three more onstage Eddies to come, a couple of costume changes, pyro and fog machines. And, yes, there’s also that machine-gun, manned with purpose by Bruce as he gleefully shoots fireworks at cyborg Eddie during *Heaven Can Wait*. It isn’t just Eddie that takes pot shots from the frontman, either; any attempts by tonight’s audience to take it easy are met with fierce castigation from the singer, who labels an early response to his classic “SCREAM FOR ME!” rallying cry as “fucking pathetic”, before telling an entire section of the O2’s seated section to “fuck off” when their participation is deemed subpar.

It’s all tongue in cheek, of course, but it adds to a sense of mischief and mayhem that underpins much of the show, emphasised by a couple of miscues that briefly leave the otherwise flawless metal machine scrambling. Clearly, some of the technical issues that hovered over the first show are still lingering, but it’s all par for the course this early in a major metal tour, and it doesn’t derail a triumphant evening, a jubilant *Wasted Years* putting the cherry on top of a fine performance.

When we ask Steve Harris how he thinks the tour is going so far the following morning, he’s pretty relaxed about the whole thing.

“It takes, usually, five or six shows for us to really get where we wanna be,” he offers modestly. “If you wanna just stand there like we do in rehearsals, we would probably play it note-perfect right from the very start, but you can’t be like that.”

Hammer is sitting beside Maiden’s founder and commander-in-chief in the back of a blacked-out minibus currently making its way to a local football stadium, where the bassist will lead a team of staff, industry pals and ex-pro footballers in a full 90-minute, 11-a-side charity match against local team SK Slavia Praha. This is the same 67-year-old who, less than 12 hours before, was gallivanting up and down an arena stage and will be doing the same thing nine hours from now. Does he never wake up on mornings like these and think, ‘I need a day off’?

“Not yet! Ha!” he chuckles in that relaxed East London tone. “But,” he adds somewhat hesitantly, “I haven’t played a competitive match since last year!”

Dressed in a faded grey Jack Daniel’s t-shirt and grey camo shorts, Steve signs merchandise and takes photos with a host of fans that have amassed outside the band’s hotel before we leave – something he insists he’s “happy to do” whenever there’s time. The main thrust of our chat is the *Somewhere In Time* era. That album represented a pivotal point in Maiden’s career. Not only did it see the band incurring the wrath of fans by experimenting with guitar synthesisers, which allowed Steve and guitarists Adrian Smith and Dave Murray to alter the sound of their instruments to sound like synths (heresy in 80s metal terms), it found the band themselves at a point of burnout, knackered after the gruelling World Slavery tour, which took in 189 shows across 331 days.

Commercially, the album was a success, going platinum and bringing Maiden closer than ever to breaking the US

IRON MAIDEN

Steve Harris proves that Bruce isn't the only member of Maiden handy with a machine-gun

Billboard Top 10 for the first time. Internally, however, things were becoming fraught – Bruce Dickinson was famously so fed up that he sat out the record's writing sessions. Presumably, there must have been an odd atmosphere in the camp.

"The atmosphere was OK, but Bruce was ready for the funny farm," Steve admits. "I mean, who wouldn't be? We didn't turn anything down in those days, so anything that got thrown at us, we were like, 'Yes! We can do it!' We were young, and you just wanna go out and play as much as possible. All that touring, album-tour-album-tour, constantly for that seven or eight years after being signed… it was the right thing to do, but it took its toll on certain people. Bruce… it took its toll on him."

Bruce's enthusiasm took a further hit when his early contributions to the album were rejected – even if for good reason. Put frankly: at that point, with Maiden reaching the peak of their 80s powers, it just was *not* the time to turn off the amps.

"THIS MIGHT BE BRUTAL, BUT WE DON'T DO THIS FOR THE AUDIENCE"

STEVE HARRIS

"He was coming up with a lot of acoustic stuff," Steve explains between bites of a pre-match banana, "and it just wasn't the right thing to do at the time. I think he was disappointed, obviously, but what can you do? I have to go by my gut."

If you've assumed that Steve Harris has developed the kind of heartless, steely resolve required to make tough calls and disappoint his bandmates, think again. The bassist is quick to admit that it's a process he still finds absolutely agonising.

"It's very, very difficult," he sighs. "It's the hardest thing in the world when someone comes to you with an idea, and you have to say to them, 'It's not suitable.' It's really tough! If they think it's good enough to bring to you, they must *believe* it is. So how do you tell them it isn't?"

It was a battle worth waging. Divisive upon release, *Somewhere In Time* is now regarded as a vitally important Maiden record. Those guitar synthesisers, controversial as they were at the time, paved the way for the introduction of keyboards on 1988's follow-up album, *Seventh Son Of A Seventh Son*. For the most part, those keyboards been present ever since.

Whether it's Steve Harris making tough calls or the band being prepared to challenge their fans' expectations, Maiden's steadfast refusal to let any outside influence permeate their world has consolidated them as metal's – maybe all of music's – most single-minded success story. Be it producers, critics, peers or their own followers, over their near-50-year lifespan, they've caved to no one. They've never tried to court the mainstream. They don't chase critical respect. They certainly don't care about awards or industry recognition; their absence from the Rock And Roll Hall Of Fame continues to outrage the metal community, but talking to Steve, it's clear the band themselves couldn't care less.

"I've never been worried about it," shrugs Steve. "If people get recognised there, that's fine, but we've never done music to be in some 'Hall Of Fame'. If it was a thing that was voted by fans, that'd be OK, but the way it works…

The Three Amigos: Adrian Smith, Dave Murray and Janick Gers

Nicko! He's behind yooooou!

it doesn't really represent anything. I don't know how I'd feel about it if we did actually get in."

It's getting toasty as we pull up to the football ground, with temperatures sailing towards 25°C. A handful of ex-pros are in attendance, including former Manchester United winger Karel Poborský, ex-Liverpool midfielder Patrik Berger and one-time Scotland international – and longtime Maiden fan – Colin Hendry.

Steve bids us farewell as he heads towards the changing rooms to pow-wow with his teammates; he'll go on to score a cracking goal in an emphatic 10-6 win.

The bassist looks like he's barely broken a sweat as we climb back into the minibus, and, despite tonight's concert looming, he still takes the time to snap more photos with the fresh batch of fans that are waiting as we arrive back at the hotel. There's a whiff of Beatlemania whenever Maiden come to town, but like most things, it doesn't faze them much. You might not know it from the elated reactions the Future Past setlist has been getting, but even when it comes to picking which songs to play on tour, Maiden listen to one voice and one voice only: their own.

"This might be blunt and brutal, but we don't do it for the audience," Steve notes. "We do it for our own thing. We've gotta feel comfortable with what we're playing and enjoy it, and then, hopefully, they'll like it. That's always been our stance. All the way through."

"I HAD MIXED FEELINGS ABOUT EDDIE OVER THE YEARS"
ADRIAN SMITH

A little later, inside the hotel, we find Adrian Smith, one of Maiden's three guitarists. He sat out the football game, preferring to watch from the sidelines. Dressed in a sports top and black Formula 1 cap, he's relaxed and reliably honest, pulling no punches in his assessment of the slight malfunctions the tour has experienced so far.

"I think the first show we did was probably the worst first show we've ever done!" he says, as we perch on some plush sofas near the hotel's reception. There were, apparently, a couple of technical "train wrecks". "It's a complex set," he explains. "Coming out and opening with *Caught Somewhere In Time* is a real handful, and it's difficult to settle yourself down in front of an audience that just wants you to go mad all the time."

The guitarist has fond memories of *Somewhere In Time* itself – not least because, in part thanks to Bruce taking a back seat, he was able to flex his creative muscles more, contributing three tracks of his own, including what would become the record's hallmark anthem, *Wasted Years*.

"It always feels good to get your ideas on an album," he says. "You have five, six [members] now in the band, and creatively you have to be strong to get your ideas across, because *everyone's* got ideas. On *Somewhere In Time*, creatively for me, it was fantastic."

Despite being delighted at getting stuck into the creative side of *Somewhere In Time*, he acknowledges that it came at a time when things in the band could have been better.

"There were a few cracks there," he admits. "I think Bruce was disappointed that he didn't get any ideas [accepted], and

I can fully understand that. He was probably unhappy and that showed in different ways. It put a strain on things."

Both Adrian and Bruce would be gone from the band within a few years, returning in '99 to help usher in Maiden's second golden age. The guitarist's departure in 1990 came down to creative differences, but he reveals that there's another staple of Maiden's ID that, shockingly, he's been conflicted over in times gone by: their ever-present mascot.

"I had mixed feelings about Eddie over the years," he says. "I thought, 'Is this overshadowing the band? It's a big puppet, is it a bit questionable?' We've had a few really dodgy Eddies over the years where I've thought, 'Oh my god…'"

He came round to Eddie's place in Maiden's world a long time ago, though. So much so, in fact, that the band's latest stage show ranks amongst his very favourites.

"With this new show, we've found a great balance," he notes. "It's got a modern edge with the screens, and the Eddies look really good. The walk-ons look great!"

That big bastard samurai Eddie at the end of the show looks alright too, Adrian.

"Yeah," he concedes amiably. "It looks powerful!"

Luckily for us, Maiden have another chance to show it all off tonight – and if last night's concert was a fun (if occasionally unruly) affair, this evening's sequel is special from the off. Everything feels tighter and more certain; from the second the band come charging out for another blast of *Caught Somewhere In Time*, the atmosphere feels that bit more charged, more elevated, more *fun*. Both onstage and off it, everyone is having an absolute blast; even Bruce Dickinson is quick to note that the crowd feels more "alive" than the previous night.

"Welcome… to The Future Past Tour!" he grins, jovially quizzing his audience on its age. "I feel really old," he jokes, before introducing a blinding run-through of *The Writing On The Wall*.

As great as it is seeing so many old and rare cuts get their dues over these two shows (and yes, *Alexander The Great* is immense), it's startling just how vital and vibrant the *Senjutsu* material is. *The Writing On The Wall*'s imperious, half-time stomp sounds colossally heavy, while the twin epics, *Death Of The Celts* and *Hell On Earth*, are magnificent, the former bolstered by rolling walls of fog and the latter powered by relentless bursts of pyro.

The singer is in his melodramatic element throughout, though that's not to say there isn't still room for silliness. At one point during *Alexander The Great*, Bruce finds himself wearing a cloth Roman helmet that someone has brought to the show, bouncing around the stage, laughing like a kid who's huffed too much Dip-Dab. Barely a minute later, he's belting out the song's stirring chorus, as some of the fans around *Hammer* who have been waiting decades to hear the song live begin to tear up. It's that mixture of the ridiculous and the sublime that make Maiden so very beloved and so very enduring. Maiden gigs are a place where we can marvel at the power of an amazing riff or a soaring chorus, where we can hug our mates in joy as songs that defined our youth blare out around us. They're also a place where can watch a 64-year-old man shooting fireworks at a big, scary cyborg.

"Every fucking day we do this is the best day of our lives," Bruce shouts as *Wasted Years* brings things to a close once again, the emotion around the room practically peeling off the walls. Looking around, the feeling is more than mutual. Maiden's past might be tussling with the future tonight, but their place as heavy metal's definitive band is timeless.

SENJUTSU IS OUT NOW VIA PARLOPHONE. FOR MORE IRON MAIDEN UPDATES, STAY TUNED TO WWW.METALHAMMER.COM

BIRDS OF A FEATHER

The Raven Age prove the apple hasn't fallen far from the Iron Maiden tree

In early 2021, worrying news began to filter out of the Tower Of London. According to centuries-old legend, at least six ravens must be kept at the tower or the kingdom will fall. But the so-called 'Queen' raven, a bird named Merlina, had vanished, bringing the total down to seven and setting off alarm bells with those who believe in such myths.

Not everyone was unhappy about this potentially ruinous situation. For British metallers The Raven Age, the prospect of the monarchy and its subjects falling into ruin was less a disaster in waiting, more a source of inspiration.

"The idea of the ravens leaving the tower is something that's embedded pretty deep in our heritage, history and mythology as a country," says The Raven Age guitarist George Harris, sitting with singer Matt 'MJ' James in a dressing room in Prague's O2 Arena. The band are here opening for Iron Maiden, and if George's surname rings a bell, it should – he's Steve's son.

As their band name suggests, the titular corvids – a symbol of death in many cultures – are part of The Raven Age's own identity. The band's 2017's debut, *Darkness Will Rise*, and 2019's follow-up, *Conspiracy*, referenced the semi-mythical figure of The Raven King in their artwork. But with their third album, *Blood Omen*, this enigmatic monarch takes centre stage. The short version is that the Raven King is wants to claim his creatures back from the Tower, precipitating the fall of Britain.

"He's basically coming to take the throne, to bring down the monarchy and weed out the parasites in the establishment," says George.

MJ adds that they played around with a title explicitly referencing the fall of the monarchy. "Given everything that's happened recently, it's probably best that we didn't," says the singer. "It could have been bad timing."

The Raven Age kept busy during Covid, releasing their half-acoustic/half-live *Exile* album in September 2021. They began working on *Blood Omen* during the pandemic, too, but realised that might not be the best time to release it. Instead, they spent their enforced downtime refining the songs and the arrangements.

"In a weird, backwards way, the pandemic helped, because I think the album is stronger because of it," says MJ.

Blood Omen takes old-school metal values – melody, power, giant hooks – and brings modern energy to them.

"It's too easy to just chuck some screaming vocals over some heavy riffs," says George. "We really try to avoid that – there are so many kinds of beatdown you can do, and they've all been done before."

This isn't the first time The Raven Age have supported Iron Maiden – they played some dates on 2016's Book Of Souls tour. But even if they hadn't opened for Maiden before, family ties mean they know just how tough the headliner's audiences can be.

"It's the hardest gig going," says George. "I've seen some bands go down like a sack of potatoes. All you can do is knuckle down and put on the best performance you can possibly do."

"We consider ourselves a theatrical band, and Maiden are the pinnacle of that, so I think the audiences get it," adds MJ.

And the downside of having a famous dad peering over your shoulder?

"I don't have much time to see him to be honest," says George. "He'll come and watch us and he'll give us his brutally honest advice. He always says what he thinks: 'This is my advice, you can take it or leave it', then it's [mimes someone aggressively putting over their point of view] 'Rarrr-rarrr-rarrr!' He doesn't hold back! Ha ha ha!"

SYSTEM OF A DOWN

HAPPY. SAD.

ANGRY. HORNY.

…That's how Armenian-American weirdbeards System Of A Down described their music when they first turned nu metal on its head 25 years ago. This is the story of their game-changing debut album

WORDS: JON WIEDERHORN

GETTY

System Of A Down had released just one radio single, the jazzy post-hardcore oddity *Sugar*, when they flew to Europe in October 1998 to open for Slayer on tour. Having already supported them in the States, System guitarist Daron Malakian had developed a strategy for getting the thrash giants' impatient fans to pay attention.

"I figured out that the best way of dealing with them was to challenge them a little bit," he told me for the 2014 book *Louder Than Hell: The Definitive Oral History Of Metal*. "I'd encouraged them to heckle us, and if they weren't yelling, *'SLAYERRRR!'* by the middle of our show, I'd call them a bunch of pussies. I wanted to give them a bit of a hard time before they gave us a hard time."

In late 1998, the growing media buzz that surrounded System had yet to translate into real-life excitement, and Slayer's European fans seemed ambivalent to their quirky, art-damaged metal. After a frustrating show in Berlin, in which the audience remained nonplussed at the sight of these four Armenian-Americans cavorting around the stage, Daron told his bandmates that he had a plan.

"I said, 'Look, if these guys don't applaud for us after we play the first song, *Know*, we're gonna play it again, over and over, until they react,'" he said in 2014. "We played *Know* and the crowd was pretty silent. So John started *Know* again, and we all played it. Halfway through the song, they were actually cheering for us. My attitude was, 'You're gonna love us whether you like it or not, and if you don't, you're gonna hear this song over and over again.'"

That unrelenting determination, unwillingness to compromise and insistence on defying convention didn't just help System Of A Down win over the tough Slayer crowd, it helped to turn them into one of the most successful and mould-breaking bands of the last 25 years. And their debut, self-titled album was the spark that lit the fire.

When *System Of A Down* was released in June 1998, metal was in a strange place. The old guard were in bad shape, with Bruce Dickinson and Rob Halford having left Iron Maiden and Judas Priest respectively earlier in the decade, and many other older bands had been taken out of the game by grunge. Metallica had chopped off their hair and released the divisive *Load* and *Reload* albums. Nu metal trailblazers such as Korn, Deftones and Limp Bizkit had dispensed with the genre's flash and shred, replacing it with rapping, turntables and samples.

System Of A Down were initially lumped in with nu metal, but there was clear water between them and their shiny-tracksuited, baseball-cap-wearing peers. Their difficult-to-categorise debut was heavy, quirky and dangerously eclectic. It sounded like an acid-damaged hybrid of hardcore-orientated Slayer, early Faith No More and Dead Kennedys, with multitextured guitars, syncopated drums, nasal melodic vocals and jazzy frills. Some tracks were injected with Middle-Eastern and Armenian musical flourishes; others were sprinkled with carnivalesque lunacy or melancholy atmospheres.

"When we write music, we try to do something different than even what we do," Serj Tankian told me in 1998, just before the release of his band's debut album. "I'm serious. We want every new song to be done in a way we haven't done before. We try to *not* sound like System Of A Down, let alone anyone else. That keeps us not only a step ahead, but a step ahead of ourselves."

Serj was born in Beirut, Lebanon in 1967, though his ancestry dates back to Turkey, and his four grandparents were survivors of the Armenian genocide in which up to 1.5 million people died at the hands of the Ottoman Empire (the forerunner of modern-day Turkey). His family left Beirut in the mid-70s after the outbreak of a civil war, settling in Glendale, California, home to the second-biggest Armenian community in the world.

Growing up, Serj listened to a variety of music, from The Beatles and the Bee Gees to traditional Armenian music. The young Serj's parents sent him to Rose And Alex Pilibos Armenian School in East Hollywood. There, he learned more about Armenian customs and the Armenian Genocide. He graduated from university in 1989 with a marketing degree, setting up his own software company, and eventually began playing keyboards with a band called Forever Young.

Born in 1975, Daron Malakian went to the same Armenian school as Serj, though his future bandmate was already in high school by that point. From the time he was a baby, Daron was exposed to classical, jazz and Armenian music. His epiphany came at age four when his cousin played him a Kiss album. When the latter appeared on early 80s US TV music show *Solid Gold*, Daron convinced his mother to let him stay up late and watch it with her.

"I was scared as hell of the way Kiss looked onstage, but I was also fascinated," he said in 2014. "I think that's how I latched on to metal."

By the age of 12, Daron had progressed from Kiss and Def Leppard to Slayer, Metallica, Overkill and German thrashers such as Kreator and Destruction. It wasn't long before he began listening to death metal pioneers Obituary, Morbid Angel and Deicide.

"I've always been a music nerd and I kept listening to all kinds of music," said Daron, "but by the time I was 14 or 15, I wanted to listen to the heaviest, most uncomfortable bands that I could find."

The two men met in 1992 at a studio in Burbank. They were in different bands at the time, though neither was creatively happy. They agreed to make music together, so they joined up with a mutual friend, bassist Dave Hakopyan, along with drummer Domingo Laranio, and formed Soil, a meandering, unfocused prog-inspired band that proved Serj and Daron had a good playing chemistry, even if their songs were nearly unlistenable.

"We had the System sound, but not the System structure," Daron said. "We would write something that would start off one way, and then it would go on for 10 minutes and end in a much different way."

Soil fell apart in 1994 after Domingo Laranio moved to Hawaii and Dave Hakopyan quit. Determined to keep playing together, Daron and Serj hired their friend and Soil fan Shavo Odadjian on bass and drummer Andy Khachaturian, who also hung out at the Burbank studio. They named their new band System Of A Down after a poem Daron had written titled 'Victims Of A Down'. The first songs they wrote were *Sugar* and *P.L.U.C.K.*, which would appear on the debut album, and *Dam*, which has never officially been released. With Shavo acting as de facto manager, hustling local club owners for gigs, the band started playing shows right away.

"Our very first gig was with some local ska band," Daron told me. "It was funny because it pretty much sold out, and it was a crazy show filled with ska fans in weird costumes and a bunch of Armenian kids showing up with Armenian flags. I guess they identified with us, so they came out to support us, which was cool. But we never felt like we were in anybody's scene. We always did our own thing."

System Of A Down rapidly developed a following by playing shows at clubs in and around Los Angeles, including Whisky A Go Go, Troubadour and The Viper Room. Even so, many A&R men scoffed at the band's demos, and some considered the group an Armenian novelty.

"That two or three years we were selling out clubs and had a huge buzz in LA, but nobody wanted to sign us because we

“OUR FIRST GIG WAS WITH A SKA BAND”

DARON MALAKIAN

GETTY

System Of A Down (left to right): Shavo Odadjian, John Dolmayan, Daron Malakian and Serj Tankian (front)

were Armenian, and we were told that to our face," recalled Daron. "They'd say: 'Yeah, there's a big Armenian community in LA, but who's gonna get you in Texas? Who's gonna get you in these places that don't even know what an Armenian is?' It was crazy because we never considered the Armenian part to be such a big part of our music, it was just what we were. It was like, 'You know, we're just a band. Armenian guys? White guys? Black guys? Who cares? It's music and we're a band.' But from a marketing point of view, it didn't work for a lot of them."

Many A&R executives may have been baffled by System Of A Down, but by 1997 they were becoming too popular to ignore for much longer. A few labels finally started courting the band, including Universal, which at the time was mostly an R'n'B and rap label and didn't have any established rock bands.

The band were considering Universal's offer when they found themselves forced to deal with an internal problem. While Andy Khachaturian was a great drummer, he was something of a loose cannon. At one point, he hooked up with a woman who already had a boyfriend. When the boyfriend confronted him, fists flew, and the drummer wiped the floor with his opponent. When the dust cleared, the boyfriend filed assault charges and at the end of one of the band's sets, police stormed the stage and hauled the drummer off.

Anticipating worsening problems, System asked their friend John Dolmayan if he would learn the drum parts if they needed someone to fill in for a few shows, if their regular drummer wasn't able to play them. It wasn't long before the situation changed permanently.

"Andy ended up getting into a fight and punched a wall and shattered every bone from his fingers all the way up to his elbow, so he couldn't play drums," recalled Daron. "Shavo was the one who found out and when he told me I turned to him right away and said, 'Call John and tell him he's in.' I didn't even stutter. And he fit in right away, 'cos he's a great drummer, he knew the songs, and it was an extra plus that he was Armenian."

The recruitment of their new drummer coincided with System Of A Down's big break. Rick Rubin, founder of Def Jam Records and current head of American Recordings (and the man who produced landmark albums by Slayer, the Beastie Boys and Johnny Cash), had caught one of the band's shows at The Viper Room and he couldn't believe System hadn't been signed yet. When the band told him that Universal were interested, he offered them a better deal. System signed to American Recordings.

The band began working on their debut album in early 1998, with Rubin producing. The album would be recorded in the famous Sound City Studios, where Nirvana had made *Nevermind*, and the producer's own studio, The Mansion, in Laurel Canyon. Since System Of A Down had been playing most of the songs for over a year, they were tight and well-rehearsed, and their excitement at working on an album kept them energised and upbeat.

"It was easy to make," Serj recalled in 1998. "Rick's idea was, 'You guys are so crazy onstage in terms of sound and dynamics, I just want to record it as it is, as live as possible.' We did the vocals at Rick's mansion in a tent because the room was not built as a studio. It was a study room with windows and cement, so we set up a tent in the middle of the room and put in antique furniture and it turned out so cool."

When the album was finished, it was clear they had created one of the most innovative, unusual debuts of the year, if not the decade. Across 40 minutes, it pinballed between everything from screwball jazz to crushing metal, often within the same song. Lyrically, the album was just as head-spinning, alternately addressing corrupt priests, war, conformity, drugs, the CIA, suicide, sex and the Armenian genocide.

For Daron, meeting Ozzy and Mikkey Dee was like "summer camp"

"WE NEVER FELT LIKE WE WERE IN ANYBODY'S SCENE"

DARON MALAKIAN

"I don't like to stick to certain themes or subjects," Serj said of his lyrics in 1998. "You don't wake up in the morning and think about one thing during your whole day. You think about love for a second, you think about hate for a second. You get angry at your boss for a second. So with System Of A Down, we want to bring out more than one emotion through the music and I hope it makes the person listening to the music feel more than one thing during one song. Sometimes we're sad, then horny, then happy, then angry, in no particular order. And I think people find that interesting."

Released on June 30, 1998, *System Of A Down* peaked at No.124 in the US and No.103 in the UK, but nevertheless, a buzz was building around them. That buzz only intensified a month later, when the band were added to that year's Ozzfest as main stage opener.

"The line-up was ridiculous," recalled Daron. "It was Ozzy Osbourne, Tool, Megadeth, Melvins, Motörhead. So, shit, it was great for me. I got to meet Ozzy and I used to sit there and have lunch with Mikkey Dee, the drummer of Motörhead and King Diamond. I grew up listening to him in King Diamond, so I had a great time asking him all these questions about the King Diamond days. It was like a crazy summer camp that could only be in the dream of a 12-year-old listening to those bands."

GETTY

SOAD welcomed us into their weird and wonderful world

ONCE UPON A TIME IN HOLLYWOOD

What happened to the So-Cal scene's Class Of '98?

COAL CHAMBER
Then: LA nu metal first-wavers who went big on facial piercings and fishnet shirts. Electrifying debut single *Loco* remains a nailed-on rock-club banger.
Now: Split after 2002's *Dark Days*. Singer Dez Fafara formed Devildriver, though Coal Chamber reunited in 2015, and again for this year's Sick New World festival.

HUMAN WASTE PROJECT
Then: The great lost band of the late 90s LA scene – art rock meets nu metal. Ross Robinson was a fan and produced their sole album, *e-lux*.
Now: Split in 1998, just as nu metal hit a major upswing. Singer Aimee Echo formed the new wave-influenced The Start. She now works as a yoga teacher.

TURA SATANA
Then: LA rap metallers fronted by charisma-bomb singer Tairrie B. Started out as Manhole before changing their name to Tura Satana after the iconic B-movie actress.
Now: Tairrie launched the alt-rock-leaning My Ruin in 1999. Tairrie's last album came out in 2020; she's currently writing her autobiography.

ORGY
Then: Nu metal synth-pop peacocks who scored a hit with a cover of New Order's *Blue Monday*. Guitarist Ryan Shuck played with Jonathan Davis in pre-Korn band SexArt.
Now: Reunited in 2010 after going on hiatus five years earlier. Still kicking around, though singer Jay Gordon is the only remaining original member.

ULTRASPANK
Then: Santa Barbara-based second-wavers signed to Korn's label Epic as part of the great nu metal goldrush. Released their self-titled debut album in 1998.
Now: Split up in 2001, a year after releasing acclaimed second album *Progress*. Singer Pete Murray was last seen in electro-rockers Life On Planet 9.

Ozzfest marked a step up for System Of A Down. It helped push *Sugar*, their debut single that had been released a couple of months earlier, up the US alternative charts. The band's image – a mix of wild hair, shaved heads and elaborate beards, occasionally augmented with vivid make-up – was instantly eye-catching. The fact that the band was made up of four Armenian-Americans became a big part of the narrative surrounding the band, something Serj pushed back against.

"As a band, I wouldn't say we're grounded in the Armenian community," he told me in 1998. "We're proud of our heritage, and it's definitely an influence that we don't want to deny as far as our music and our standing and some of our thinking. But it's not specifically something we're trying to involve in our music and say, 'Look at us. We're Armenian. This is what we're doing with our Armenian music.' It's not something we're trying to point to, because in no way do we want to use that as any sort of gimmick. We're a rock band and we all happen to be Armenian."

Twenty five years after it was released, System Of A Down's debut album stands as a unique calling card for a band that would soon begin to disentangle themselves from the nu metal movement into which they had been corralled. It isn't as hook-laden as 2001's *Toxicity*, or as polished as 2005's *Mezmerize* and *Hypnotize*, but it stands as the band's most aggressive and confrontational album.

In 1998, Serj Tankian perfectly distilled the band's essence: "In some ways, the fact that we're Armenian has something to do with, at times, feeling like an outsider, and wanting to make outsider music," he said. "But it's not just that. It's like the band's name. It does entail feeling oppressed or helpless, but the reason why we want to show that to people is so they can see the light and get out and be free, not so they'll fall under their own rocks and die. Hopefully, we can open some people's minds and make them think, whether it's about creativity in art or politics or whatever. As long as they think for themselves, they're on the right path."

GETTY. PRESS

VOICE OF BACEPROT

PRESS

VOICE OF BACEPROT

TAKE THE POWER BACK

Their revolutionary songs have earned them approval from Tom Morello and an Indonesian 'Grammy,' but as we found out in August, Voice Of Baceprot are just getting started

WORDS: GISELA SWARAGITA

VOICE OF BACEPROT

"I am so hungry!" laments Voice Of Baceprot bassist Widi. Leaning on her shoulder, drummer Sitti looks like she has no energy left to comment. Only singer Marsya keeps her cool, taking a few selfies with her phone.

It's the middle of Ramadan, and 30 minutes before Iftar, when the girls will be able to break their fast. Here in Jakarta, Indonesia, it falls at around 6pm. We're sitting in a tiny coffee shop, inside a quiet suburban housing complex, and Ghost's *Ritual* is playing at a low volume from an unseen speaker.

The members of Voice Of Baceprot, sitting side-by-side in their black hijab, black t-shirts and black trousers, look like millions of other cheerful women in their early 20s in Jakarta. However, they're the only ones who have played at Wacken, and gained approval from the likes of Slash and Rage Against The Machine's Tom Morello. Forming at school in 2014, they went viral four years later with *School Revolution* – a song about pushing back against rules and advocating for students to follow their dreams. Last year, they received an AMI award – the Indonesian equivalent of the Grammys or the Brits – for Best Rock Group. While they initially made headlines for being God-fearing girls playing the Devil's music, there's much more to Voice Of Baceprot.

Firda Marsya Kurnia, Widi Rahmawati and Euis Sitti Aisyah met at a Madrasah Tsanawiyah – an Islamic equivalent to a junior high school – in the mountainous district of Singajaya in Garut Regency, West Java. Six hours' drive from Jakarta, it's so rural that "even the Regent [elected leader] of Garut didn't know that Singajaya existed!" Marsya exclaims.

The name 'Singajaya' can be loosely translated into 'The Winning Lion'. Legend has it that a magical half-warrior, half-lion being dwells in the terrain that surrounds the district, consisting of lush pine forests, farmland and tea plantations under the shadow of Mount Cikuray.

The people in Singajaya hold on to their ethnic Sundanese culture tightly and are devout in their Islamic faith. It's common for girls to wear headscarves outside the house, or inside the house when their parents have guests. So, wearing hijab in public is normal for Voice Of Baceprot – it's a part of their outfit.

The trio were born into the families of farmers who live a self-sufficient life of tending vegetable gardens and breeding goats. They mostly listened to dangdut, a genre with danceable tunes and lyrics about heartbreak. Despite being popular, it's ironically perceived as being the music of the poor and tasteless, and the girls talk about their dangdut roots as a guilty pleasure.

"Besides listening to my mother's dangdut collection, I also used to listen to what was popular at that time on TV, such as Cherrybelle and Coboy Junior," Sitti says, referencing two teen bubblegum pop groups who were big in the 2010s.

They discovered metal by chance, when they borrowed their drama teacher's computer to do their homework and found his playlist, featuring System Of A Down, Slipknot and Metallica.

"We were instantly hooked by the songs – especially *Toxicity* by System Of A Down," Widi says. "We told ourselves, 'Wow, this is a breath of fresh air from all of that dangdut and Cherrybelle music!'"

The metalhead drama teacher was Erza, whom they affectionately call Abah, a Sundanese word for 'father'. A music aficionado, he introduced the girls to their respective instruments, and after forming Voice Of Baceprot – 'baceprot', pronounced 'bah-che-prot', means 'noisy' in Sudanese – the girls would jam in an empty school storage room. Abah became their manager, booking shows around Garut where the band would play nu metal covers, videos of which went viral.

"He has the basic skill to play various instruments, but he is mediocre in all of them!" Widi laughs.

The first few years of Voice Of Baceprot were challenging. Playing music is still frowned upon in conservative Islamic society, especially if it's Western rock music played by young girls. Instead of telling their parents they were having regular band practices, the trio lied and said they'd joined the Girl Scouts.

"My parents are the most conservative among them," Widi says. "There was one time that I was grounded for one month, and they forbade me from playing music at all. Until Marsya came and told my parents that we did not do any sinful things while playing music."

One morning, Marsya's family woke up to discover her mother's fresh produce store had been vandalised by unknown perpetrators, who left a note saying that bad things would happen if she did not stop playing music. Another time, her bedroom window was smeared with a painted message in Sudanese: 'Maneh geulis ngan hanjakal umurna moal panjang' ('You are pretty but you won't live long').

"A person threw a stone at me when I was coming back from rehearsal. The stone was wrapped in paper with a written threat," she says.

Many local ultra-conservative groups say music is haram – forbidden – according to their interpretation of Islamic teaching. This led to the girls getting expelled. "The headmaster said, 'Music is haram'," Marsya

Voice Of Baceprot (left to right): Sitti, Marsya, Widi

laughs. "Luckily, we got accepted at another school who saw our value and even embraced our status as musicians."

In 2018, Voice Of Baceprot signed with Jakarta-based booking agency Amity Asia, which represents South East Asian talent across many genres, meaning they're on the same roster as bands such as Bali's punk rock trio Superman Is Dead and pop-jazz band Ten2Five.

Due to bureaucracy that makes it difficult for civil servants such as teachers to resign, Abah Ezra stepped back as manager, but he's still available whenever the girls need guidance. "It all started from Abah, really," Marsya said. "We still call him every now and then."

After graduating from high school, the band moved to Jakarta in 2020, where they now live together. They spend their days writing songs and having music lessons with high-profile mentors: Andyan Gorust from death metal band Hellcrust and Gusti Hendy from rock band GIGI for Sitti; Stevi Item from death metallers DeadSquad for Marsya; and jazz bass player Barry Likumahuwa for Widi.

During 2021-2022, Voice Of Baceprot toured Europe, including a stop at Wacken. Along the way, they experienced many firsts, including seeing snow in Switzerland and meeting other supportive women in the metal scene.

"When we joined the panel at Wacken Open Air, 'Let Women Do The Talking', we met and chatted with Tracy Vera, president of Metal Blade Records, and Jenny Douglas [from 5B Artist Management], the tour manager of many of our favourite bands," Widi says.

They point to other all-girl bands that are rising in their country, such as The Dare, based on the Indonesian island of Lombok, and

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Voice Of Baceprot are inspiring other women in their country to dream big

hardcore unit PEACH. "I also listened to the Bandung-based band, Bánanách, yesterday! They have great songs," Marsya tells us.

"It is so relieving to meet all of these incredible women in the music industry, who see us as friends, instead of seeing us as rivals or enemies!" she adds, mentioning that internalised misogyny is rampant among the women in the local, male-dominated metal scene.

The band no longer face negative comments from family and friends. "When we come home, we often play pretend that we are the rich aunties from the city," Marsya giggles. "It is nice to be able to buy my parents stuff without having to worry about the price."

Marsya, aged 22 (Sitti is also 22, and Widi 21), says if they hadn't found metal, and had stayed in Garut like many of their peers, they might already have kids.

"Many of my friends are married with children now; some of them have even married and divorced several times over," she says. "Music saved us from that kind of life."

"I HOPE GIRLS SEE IT'S OK TO DO WHAT YOU WANT"

SITTI

There's 15 minutes left before Iftar, and Voice Of Baceprot's team bring over a selection of fish dumplings, donuts and rice cakes, which the girls stare at longingly. Their manager, Dani, also puts a plate of rice, fried fish and spicy chilli paste sambal in front of each of them.

"These girls always have their rice for Iftar. These little snacks won't be enough," he tells *Metal Hammer*. "And the food has to be spicy. It became quite a problem when we toured Europe, as it was difficult to find rice dishes and proper sambal."

Now they've impressed Europe, the band's ambition is to tour America. But first, they're releasing their debut album, *RETAS*.

"We are tired of being called a cover band!" Sitti laughs.

On *RETAS*, an Indonesian word for 'the act of hacking' or 'disrupting', they're continuing to sing about social issues such as gender equality, religious tolerance and global warming, and have written lyrics in Bahasa Indonesia, Sudanese and English.

Their latest single, *The Enemy Of The Earth Is You*, is about the environmental impact of tourism. West Java, the closest province to Jakarta, has seen an influx of holidaymakers who are sharing their experiences on Instagram and TikTok, resulting in certain rural destinations going viral. The local populations then struggle to cope with the extra people and, once the trend is over, the land is left littered with rubbish. In some cases, trees are cut down to make way for tourist infrastructure, increasing the risk of avalanches, flooding and temperature rises.

"Garut is now significantly warmer than when we were children," Marsya explains. "Also, many city dwellers go there for the scenery but at the expense of the local community. When the locals play in the rivers, it becomes a circus to the watchers. Once we went back to Garut, and we found some rivers where we used to play as children had been turned into this Instagramable tourism bait."

It doesn't bode well for the future of the planet.

"We're farmers' daughters through and through. Nature is our source of life. If nature is wrecked, our life is also doomed," Marsya adds.

Voice Of Baceprot are keen to use social media for activism, but their management team also recognise that it helps raise the band's profile. This afternoon, their content creator asks them to pose for photos with their Iftar food. However, with growing exposure to the outside world comes a growing pressure.

"People would expect me to be magically skilful with my blastbeats after moving to Jakarta and having lessons with Andyan Gorust and Gusti Hendy, while in fact it's really hard!" Sitti says.

"As for me, I often get unsolicited DMs from middle-aged men!" Marsya laments.

She has 78,000 followers on Instagram, compared with Sitti's 67,000 and Widi's 52,000.

"Many old, fat men with wives DM me with messages like, 'Hi, can I call you 'baby'? You remind me of my daughter.' Why can't you just take care of your daughter, then?"

The call for the dusk prayer finally arrives, and it's time to break the fast. After a short cheer and congratulating themselves for managing it, they say a quick prayer, sip from their tall glasses of ice-cold water, and attack the fried fish.

Voice Of Baceprot have already achieved so much, but their journey's only just begun. Not only do they intend to carry on raising awareness of injustice, they want to become role models who can empower the next generation of women to dream big and make their own decisions.

"I hope that what we achieve shows to the little girls in Garut that the world is really, really big, and that going out from your hometown is not scary," says Sitti. "And that it is OK to do what you want."

***RETAS* IS OUT NOW VIA 12WIRED**

PRESS

FIVE MINUTES WITH DANNY WORSNOP ASKING ALEXANDRIA

The frontman talks new music, fans having sex at shows, and pissing off conservative Christians in the Bible Belt

WORDS: MATT MILLS

The new Asking Alexandria album, *Where Do We Go From Here?*, is the heaviest the band have sounded since you came back…
"That was by design. Our last album [2021's *See What's On The Inside*] was very much a 'for us' album, where we got to lock ourselves in a studio and create something that we love and are obsessed with. So, I thought, 'Let's do a "for them" album.' Obviously, it's not an accurate gauge looking at comment sections, because people with good souls and happiness inside don't go there, but there are sub-demographics of fans that feel underappreciated. [I thought,] 'Let's switch it up and lean more in that direction.'"

What's the most ridiculous hate comment you've ever read?
"One of the dumbest ones I've ever read was someone talking shit about me and how we should get the original singer back. That's me!"

Have you ever listened to the album that Denis [Stoff, who fronted Asking during Danny's 18-month absence] did with the band?
"No. I wasn't interested at the time and I have no reason to go back to it now. After I came back, I asked, 'Were there any hits from that or anything I need to learn for the shows?' They adamantly said that they had no interest in playing anything off that album. That album is a different band and it doesn't have a place in Asking Alexandria."

You don't listen to metal at all, do you?
"Not even a little bit. My favourite artist is Adele and it's not even close. I listen to a fair amount of rock, like Rival Sons or The Black Crowes, when I wanna feel good and bounce around. When it comes to music, I wanna cry or laugh, basically."

So how did you join a metal band?
"Ben [Bruce, guitarist] reached out and asked me to sing for his band. I said, 'No, I'm a guitarist and you're a stranger on the internet. Stop trying to trick me into coming to a sex dungeon.' Then he gave me the pitch, which was, 'I wanna put this band together and move to America', and I was like, 'I'm in!' I'd been trying to get to America since I was five."

Once you made it to America, weren't you banned from a venue in Nashville?
"Yes. It was a very religious venue. The venue was like, 'No crowdsurfing, no moshing, no cursing.' I was incapable of that. 'Fuck' was the first word out of my mouth onstage. They cut our sound and tried to cut the brake cables on our RV, which is a very unchristian thing to do. I think they broke the AC or something."

Weren't you once playing in America and there was a couple in the crowd having sex?
"I think it was in Pennsylvania. I remember it because it was on a balcony. They brought the child they conceived that night to a show."

Please say it was a girl and her name was Alexandria.
"Ha ha! I don't remember."

As a performer onstage, what do you do when you see two people fucking?
"I don't take shows too seriously. I'm here to have fun, so the funnier I can make a show, the better. I don't care about the serious metal stuff."

How's the autobiography coming along? Because you started it when you were 21, right?
"Yeah. I've pushed pause on it. I got to a point where it felt like I'd reached the end of the stories I have to tell, but not what feels like the end of a book. I feel like I haven't reached a point where I'm like, 'That concludes this chapter' yet – especially [back] then! We'd released three albums and never had a No.1 single: I'm not sure that's very autobiography-worthy! Ha ha! That's all very 'first three chapters'."

Do you have any more plans for We Are Harlot or your solo music?
"I haven't spoken to Bruno [Agra, We Are Harlot's drummer] since we got off the last tour. He didn't want to do it anymore and I have no idea where he is. He even blocked me on Instagram. New solo music, I've been writing for the last three years and I'm slowly getting there."

***WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?* IS OUT NOW VIA BETTER NOISE RECORDS**

"CHRISTIANS TRIED TO CUT THE BRAKE CABLES ON OUR RV"

PRESS

SKINDRED

THE Prince OF WALES

Skindred's Benji Webbe loves Newport and Newport loves Benji Webbe right back. In September, we got the man himself to give us his personal guided tour of the city

WORDS: STEPHEN HILL • PICTURES: TINA KORHONEN

Newport Market is a good place to shelter from the rain on a wet Wednesday morning. A grand, cast iron structure built in 1854 to house local produce from butchers, fishmongers, greengrocers and the like, it underwent massive regeneration in 2022 and is home to a series of artisan bakeries, coffee shops and art galleries. Right now, with employees setting up for the day and a smattering of elderly locals enjoying cake and a natter, it's quiet and peaceful. At least until…

"Beep beep! Welcome to Newport!" shouts Benji Webbe, Skindred singer and unrelenting hype man for his hometown, as he careers towards *Hammer* on a lowrider bike. "You found it alright, then?" he says, loudly. "Come on, I'm going to take you round my ends!"

You'd imagine the arrival of this ball of energy clad in a leopard-print tracksuit would prompt looks of disapproval from the pensioners in the vicinity, but apparently not. "Morning, Benj!" is the general reaction, followed by a smile and a wave.

This is a good time to visit Benji on his home turf. Not only are Skindred about to release their new album, *Smile* (the first since 2018's *Big Tings* and their eighth in total), but 2023 also marks their 25th anniversary. The band that started in a rehearsal room underneath a boxing gym – which we'll visit later today – have gone on to become one of the UK's most unique and adored bands.

Throughout it all, they've been intrinsically linked to this city of 160,000 in South Wales. If Skindred have a fifth member, it's Newport itself, which is why we're here to get a guided tour of the town from its unofficial Mayor.

"Newport's the first place Joe Strummer picked up a guitar," says Benji, name-checking the late Clash singer and punk icon as *Hammer* attempts to keep pace with his lowrider on foot. "They say that him going to Notting Hill was what inspired The Clash to explore reggae. I don't think so, I think it was him going to the gigs around here. That's why this place is important to Skindred, we're part of that legacy."

Benji has been coming to Kriminal Records for decades, for the tunes and the banter

"THE COMMUNITY HERE JUST ACCEPTED ME"
BENJI WEBBE

Our first port of call is Kriminal Records, the shop where Benji bought his first ever records. Unsurprisingly, store owner Dean is more than familiar with our host.

"Oh, fuck me, here we go!" he says as he opens his door.

"Shut up and get the kettle on!" says Benji, winking.

It must be cool to have a proper rock star coming into your shop, Dean?

"I'm his mate, I'm not his fan!" Dean chortles, before looking over at Benji, who is thumbing through some CDs. "If you want respect, you've come to the wrong fucking shop!" The two men crack up.

Music was always playing in Benji's house when he was growing up. Both his parents died when he was a child, and he was raised by his older brother, who had control of the house record player. "Until one day, my Auntie Maggie from Coventry gave me a tenner, my first ever tenner," he says. "I came in here and bought my first record, *Loonee Tunes!* by [80s Two-Tone jesters] Bad Manners, and a pasty and chips, which I ate waiting for the bus home."

Bad Manners' larger-than-life mix of ska and punk was a precursor of the music Benji himself would make as an adult, but his reggae-loving brother was less keen.

"I got home, walked up to that stereo, put the record on the turntable and put that needle down. It started playing and my brother walks in and goes 'RRRRIIIIPPP' with the needle across the record. 'That's not real reggae,' he said. I stood up and went, 'What do you mean, not real? I like it!' Later on, he came back in and said to me, 'Yeah, fair play.' Ha ha!"

Benji soon began attending gigs in Newport. His first was reggae duo Clint Eastwood & General Saint, but he soon moved on to punk rock shows with his friends. He was the only black kid at those gigs, but he bats away the idea that it was an uncomfortable experience.

"I was just me," he snorts. "I'm hardly shy, am I? If I went and stood in the back and was like, 'Oh, should I be here?' then maybe I'd have felt it, but I bowled in there like I am now. I can honestly say the community here, they just accepted me, and that's why I never wanted to leave."

And he hasn't. Benji has remained in Newport his whole life. Except, that is, a short period in the 90s when he moved to Los Angeles. "It was about some girl," he says. "You know how it is."

Before we know it, he's back on his bike and we're heading out of Kriminal Records toward Le Pub, the venue where Skindred played their first show. As we trundle through the streets, people wander up and greet Benji like a mate, and he's got time for all of them. One gentleman is wearing a Skindred patch on one arm and on the other a patch of Benji's first band, ragga metal outfit Dub War. Which one does he prefer?

"Stone. Fucking. Roses!" he barks back at us.

"That's not a bad answer, that!" Benji replies with a grin.

Dub War were Benji's first crack at fronting a band. They released a pair of excellent albums on Earache Records, 1995's *Pain* and 1996's *Wrong Side Of Beautiful*, supporting the likes of Manic Street Preachers and The Stone Roses along the way. Newport itself became a mid-90s music hotspot, dubbed "the new Seattle" by the *The New York Times*. It was centred around iconic local venue TJ's, sadly now closed.

Everyone loves Mayor Benji

A nice pint of Trooper. How long until we get Skindred beer, Benj?

Le Pub, where Skindred played their first ever gig. There should be a plaque, really...

"It was exciting times around here back then," says Benji. "Dub War, Feeder, [indie punk outfit] 60ft Dolls, we all played at TJ's, which was round the corner. Great scene."

Benji pulls his bike over outside Le Pub. An unassuming-looking venue, it's advertising upcoming shows by the likes of Cancer Bats and South Wales band Himalayas, who have just been confirmed as support for Foo Fighters on a handful of dates of their UK stadium tour.

Benji proceeds to tell us a story about the night of Skindred's first gig, where members of various Welsh bands turned up at Le Pub to see his new project. One of these was the now-disgraced vocalist of a Welsh band, who Benji overheard saying that Skindred would "never be as good as Dub War" as he was coming down the venue's staircase.

"I just said, 'Yeah, they'll be shit, won't they?' as I passed him," laughs Benji. "He bricked it. I think when Dub War ended and I started Skindred, there were a few people that I had to prove wrong. They maybe thought I'd had my shot and I should give it up."

He pauses to buzz the venue's intercom. "Open the door then!" he hollers, but no one answers, so we head to the nearby McCann's Rock N Ale Bar instead.

As we get comfortable in McCann's, Benji hands out some Skindred branded beermats for the venue, who pour us some complimentary pints of Iron Maiden's Trooper Beer in return. Talk turns to Skindred's new album. *Smile* might be the broadest album the band have ever made. It still features their signature reggae/punk/metal mash-up, but it brings more contemporary and even pop elements to the party.

"I don't mind that at all," says Benji. "I think the pandemic gave us a lot of time to think and to agonise over what we were doing. If we'd had to put it out like normal then we might not have made this record, it might have just been another Skindred record. But we want to reach people, that's all I've ever wanted to do – spread positivity through music. Yeah, this has some new flavours on it, but we got new people we want to reach."

Pints downed, Benji hops back on his bike and guides us through Newport's main high street. Once again, he's stopped multiple times – everyone from middle-aged men who've known him for years to young lads who see him as a local legend and want to look at his bike. Even a postman grabs him for a chat.

"He really is the Mayor of Newport," the postie says. As he wanders off, he bellows: "Benji for Prime Minister!"

Benji erupts into laughter. "See, I told you," he says. "These are just good people. Normal, working class people. My kind of people."

Newport itself is a proudly working class city and, like all working class cities, its history has been a rollercoaster ride. Its proximity to the River Usk meant it became an important transport hub for coal and iron during the Industrial ▶

Revolution in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It was a time of great growth for the town, but there was unrest too.

"This is where the march happened," says Benji, pointing towards the now-empty Westgate Hotel. He's referring to the Newport Rising, the largest armed uprising in Welsh history, which saw 4,000 sympathisers of the working class Chartist movement march on the town in 1839 in an attempt to effect social change.

"They were protesting because they wanted the vote," he says. "They came down that hill and soldiers started shooting at them from the hill. They killed 22 people."

Newport was redeveloped in the 1960s and 70s, and the uprising's leader, John Frost, was commemorated with a square in the town centre. Yet Newport suffered in the same way that many other former mining communities in Wales did, another victim of the decline of British industry.

The local music scene became the main source of pride for the town during the harsh years of the 1980s and 1990s. Newport was awarded City status in 2002, the same year Skindred's debut album, *Babylon*, was released. Since then it has refurbished many of the classic buildings, and hosted golf's Ryder Cup and the 2014 NATO summit.

"I remember all the old places," says Benji. "I like the new ones, they're nice, don't get me wrong, but those old buildings had character."

He nods towards the Westgate Hotel. "Look at that. Beautiful, innit."

There's one important stop-off left on our guided tour of Newport: Skindred's birthplace. We head over to St Joseph's boxing gym. Underneath is a small studio run by the singer's old friend, Jamie, who is here to meet us.

"The first time Skindred ever played was in that room," Benji tells us as we walk into the studio, pointing through to a tiny area filled with vinyl and a mixing desk. "It was me, Dan [Pugsley] on bass and Jamie scratching over us."

Jamie nods his head and puffs out his cheeks. "That was a very long time ago."

Just as Dan's name is mentioned, he appears. Alongside the singer, he's the longest-serving member of Skindred. He was still in his teens when the pair met and began creating music together.

"This brings back so many memories," he smiles as he looks around the room. "I just wanted to make music with Benj, and so I upped sticks from Southampton and we made it work. I lived in Newport for about 10 years."

We're soon joined by guitarist Mikey Demus and drummer Arya Goggin. Both joined Skindred in 2002 and had their stints living in Newport, before the trio all relocated to various parts of the country.

"I still love coming back here," says Arya. "It's got a lot of amazing memories for all of us. I can come back having not been here for years and people still think I live here. 'Just got back from America, have you?'"

We head upstairs to the gym, and the members of Skindred get in the ring for a photoshoot. Halfway through, gym owner Joe wanders in. "Bloody hell," he exhales, before greeting the band. "What a blast from the past! You boys been up to much?"

"We just did Glastonbury," Benji replies.

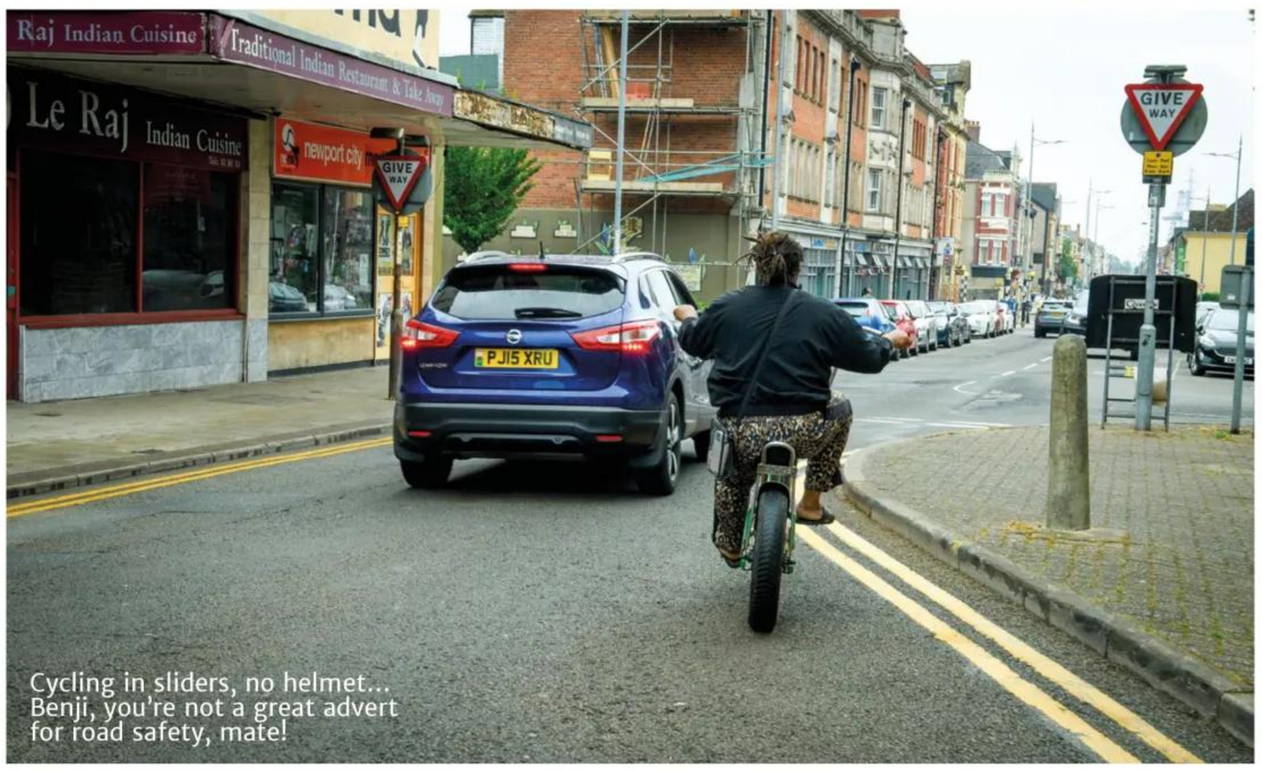
"Not bad going," nods Joe. "Hold there Benj, I got something for you." He nips into his office and comes back with a laminated Skindred poster from the band's earliest days.

"Look at that," marvels Benji. "We hadn't even got our fucking logo sorted out at that point. I'd never have believed it would be 25 years of this if you'd have told me back then..."

With the shoot over, we head to our final stop: Benji's favourite Indian restaurant, Punjab Tikka. It's an unassuming little gaff, but we're assured it'll be worth it.

London? No, thanks. I'm just fine right here

Sick wheels. Nice drip



Cycling in sliders, no helmet... Benji, you're not a great advert for road safety, mate!

"I always looked at this place and never thought to go in," he says, as we settle in and place our order. "Then one day, after a few beers on a night out, it was empty and I decided to give it a go. It's beautiful! And I've never gone anywhere else since! It just goes to show, you don't ever judge a book by its cover."

He gestures towards the guy who is placing a series of massive plates filled with various curries and some naan breads in front of us. "He used to work in a big restaurant and one day he's had enough. He just wanted his own little place. It might not look like much, but he's happy."

Fair to say you're the same, right, Benji? You could have stayed in LA or moved to London, but you chose not to.

"And I wouldn't change it for the world," he says. "Sometimes you just find your place, and this is my place. Yeah, it's not the most glamorous part in the world, but it's exciting to me. I love the people and I don't think Skindred would sound like we do without Newport. And we don't sound like anyone else, so it's given us a lot to be grateful for."

The Mayor Of Newport has spoken.

***SMILE* IS OUT NOW VIA EARACHE**

Skindred (left to right): Mikey Demus, Arya Goggin, Benji Webbe, Dan Pugsley

"WE WANT TO SPREAD POSITIVITY THROUGH MUSIC"

BENJI WEBBE

"SUDDENLY A *trout* HIT MY FACE!"

We got frontman Benji Webbe to interview his bandmates – with predictably ridiculous results

MIKEY DEMUS (guitars)

Benji: "After getting hit full in the face with a fish while onstage, did you then develop a phobia of fish?"

Mikey: "Well… no. But once you've been hit in the face with a fish, it does make you a bit more wary. It was at a festival we headlined, and suddenly this fish just hit my face and landed on my pedal board… like a full-blown trout. I think the guy who threw it thought it was an offering, like 'Thank you, Skindred, for headlining our festival.' He had been carrying that round all day. Bizarre."

Benji: "How did it feel when I ripped your shirt off while you were playing Warped Tour USA in 2002?"

Mikey: "I dunno what you were doing. It was weird. I had this pocket on my shirt, you pulled the pocket and the entire shirt just ripped off, revealing my… person. If you did that now I'd clout you with my guitar."

ARYA GOGGIN (drums)

Benji: "When the band had a day off at an adventure park in Switzerland, who did the best out of the band, and who did the worst?"

Arya: "So, we had a couple of days in this place, we went to see Zucchero [Fornaciari, Italian singer/songwriter], had a few beers, and the next day we decided to do this zip wire. It was fucking high up, man! I got the walkie-talkie call to go next, I'm speeding along, and I just see Benj hanging there, stuck! He's like 'Brace yourself!' and I smashed into him, cut my lip… then we find out they had only been open for two months. Never again!"

Benji: "Is it true that ice sculptures developed inside the tour bus after the air-con broke while Skindred were touring Finland?"

Arya: "Very true. It was so cold, I cannot even begin to explain. Like, five pairs of socks cold… like hiking Everest cold… but without the gear. It was awful."

DAN PUGSLEY (bass, programming)

Benji: "Is it true that you and Arya had a knife pulled on you in Hamburg while you were doing your laundry?"

Dan: "So weird. Once your laundry is in, you're there, right?! You can't leave until it's done. This guy came up to us and told us he was Iggor Cavalera, got a knife out, told us he hated Americans and we just had to leg it. He was mad as a trumpet."

Benji: "Do you remember Skindred touring in a prison van once, and was it cold?"

Dan: "I did, and it was. There were several iterations of the prison van, one of them set fire to one of our friends' hair. We had to turn the heating up full blast and he was in his bunk, and we could all just smell burnt hair. I remember getting ready to do a session in Maida Vale [in West London] once… it was so cold you could see your breath. I just remember thinking, 'What am I doing with my life?'"

WITHIN TEMPTATION

STAND UP AND SHOUT

It would be easy for Within Temptation to coast on their reputation as symphonic metal veterans. Instead, latest album *Bleed Out* was a daring rallying cry for freedom

WORDS: DANNII LEIVERS • PICTURES: TIM TRONCKOE

In September 2008, Within Temptation visited Kherson, a port city in the south of Ukraine, just north of the Crimean Peninsula.

The Dutch metallers were nearing the end of a year-and-half-long tour for their fourth album, *The Heart Of Everything*, and it was their first time in the Eastern European country. Two days later, they would play a show in the capital, Kyiv, but it's Kherson that sticks out most vividly in their minds: a former Eastern bloc city on the rise, the beautiful tree-lined streets, the wide Dnieper River. During their stay, they were treated to a ceremonial tour with the mayor and invited, poignantly in hindsight, to plant a tree for peace.

"They put us in national clothing and gave us traditional food," vocalist Sharon Den Adel says, remembering the warm welcome. "We had an amazing few days."

When Russian president Vladimir Putin invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, Kherson was the first major Ukrainian city to fall. Russian troops occupied the city from March to November, before it was recaptured by Ukrainian forces.

"The resistance there was really strong," says Robert Westerholt, Sharon's husband and Within Temptation co-founder/studio guitarist. "Every night, they would come out and literally slit throats of Russian soldiers, [come] out of corners and attack them in every way they could. They were really paranoid, the Russians, they never felt at ease there."

That staunch defiance inspired the band to write *Cyanide Love*, one of several songs on the band's new album, *Bleed Out*, about the Ukraine War. *'Sunflowers will soon be growing over your grave,'* sings Sharon over tense synths and downtuned guitars, a reference to a viral video on the first day of the invasion: a Ukrainian woman offers sunflower seeds to a Russian soldier with the harrowing wish that they bloom in his pocket after his death. *'You'll take it, you'll face it / The barrel of my smoking gun.'*

"We really hope to go back [to Kherson] one day," says Robert, and his voice aches with sadness.

We're sitting in the stylish but homely kitchen – all high ceilings and tall windows – of Sharon and Robert's house in a pretty, peaceful countryside town, 40 minutes from the manic tourist bustle of Amsterdam. The couple have lived here for 15 years, and it's very much their haven. As we talk, their two sons are next door playing a videogame on the TV. Their friendly black labrador, Charlie, demands a head stroke, and gold balloons strung across the front door celebrate their daughter Eva's recent high school graduation.

But it's also Within Temptation HQ, the base where they've masterminded the band's shift from ethereal, dark-edged symphonic royalty to a powerhouse of modern heavy metal (see: 2019's *Resist*).

We've been invited here for a world-exclusive playback of *Bleed Out*, the band's eighth album, which, at the time of our visit, hasn't even been officially announced. As Robert

"EVERY NIGHT THEY WOULD SLIT THROATS OF RUSSIAN SOLDIERS"

ROBERT WESTERHOLT

WITHIN TEMPTATION

Sharon is very
pro-liberty

leads us through the house, we pass a rail in the hall that holds several leather jackets, and an enormous canvas bearing the artwork of *The Heart Of Everything*. Inside the white-walled studio, art and guitars hang on one wall above a low sofa.

Sharon and Robert seem relaxed and excited to talk about the new album, although even now they're still making last-minute changes. Up until yesterday, the album had a different title; on the few tracks we were sent in advance, it was *The Ultimate Sacrifice*. The new name, Sharon says, is stronger, and more representative of the real-life struggles that have inspired some of the songs.

She was in Sweden when she heard about the invasion of Ukraine. Her immediate response, like many others, was one of shock and fear, admitting that the old-fashioned method of warfare – troops and tanks on the ground – was not something she had expected to see in her lifetime.

"Maybe that's naïve, but not in Europe," she says, curled up barefoot on a nearby armchair. "Kyiv is only a two-and-a-half-hour flight by plane [from the Netherlands]. It's the same distance as Spain, where I'm going in a few days."

Before they press play, they show us the artwork, which depicts a hooded figure in shades of black and red.

"It's dark," Sharon notes, "because the album is dark."

"THE YOUNGER GENERATION ARE READY FOR CHANGE"

SHARON DEN ADEL

While Within Temptation's last record, *Resist*, blew their sound up to supercharged proportions, just one listen of *Bleed Out* is enough to confirm that this is Within Temptation's biggest, heaviest record so far. Stepping things up a level was necessary to match the severity of the source material. Opener *Go To War* sets the tone with a colossal guitar part and an apocalyptic choir, a chorus dripping in grandeur, and a marriage of synths with the unmistakable mechanical judder of tech metal.

The latter influence, Robert says, has filtered into the band's sound not through bingeing on Meshuggah albums, but because its cold, almost cruel, mechanical nature best helped to paint a picture of a universe in crisis. "Somehow this [sound] resonates with that."

The title track follows in the same vein, anthemic and cinematic, with hints of the epic symphonic and gothic doom of their earlier material. It all sounds huge – built to fill the massive rooms the band have become accustomed to playing these days.

"Certain elements have come back in, that made us in the beginning," says Robert. "They still inspire us."

When we suggest it's a culmination of every step in the band's sonic evolution, Sharon agrees: "But with an extra layer of heaviness."

"We have been searching for this for quite some time, to have a sound that is heavy, but still has this melancholy ▶

Within Temptation have gone dark for *Bleed Out*

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and beautiful storytelling lines," she continues. "And finally, it happened on the very last few songs [we wrote]. Sometimes you have just one song that opens the door."

It would be easy to draw parallels between Within Temptation's current approach and a band like Sabaton, who have made a career out of songs that go big on bombast and heroism. Robert is quick to shut the comparison down.

"We're not making war songs. We're not doing history lessons," he says, arguing that the band didn't find inspiration in the grim reality of the battlefield. "It's more the drive of people and their personal stories. We won't be going onstage with a tank."

Within Temptation are reluctant to call this a "political" album, but there's no doubt it's their most socially aware yet, far removed from the fantastical tendencies of old. For our listening session we've been joined by the band's manager, Martijn, perhaps a sign that, while Sharon and Robert are keen to discuss the inspirations behind the album, they're cautious about the sensitivities involved. *Go To War, Cyanide Love, Worth Dying For* and *Wireless* directly reference the invasion. The latter talks about the danger of propaganda.

"I remember that I was in Russia once and saw something on my own social media," says Sharon. "I asked someone sitting next to me, 'What are they saying?' And the guy said, 'Yes, these Americans, blah, blah… completely the opposite of what I've been reading on social media where I'm living. If you don't go deeper, if you don't search for more information that tells you the story from different perspectives, then you will believe the state television. So that's why it's important to tell stories, to give counterweight."

The band almost called the track *Mark Of Cain*, a reference to Cain murdering his brother Abel in the Book Of Genesis.

"Russia sees their neighbour country as… something that belongs to them or like family," continues Sharon. "It's like you wear the Mark Of Cain, everybody knows you killed your brother."

Meanwhile, Sharon says the title track was written about Iranian woman Mahsa Amini, who was arrested for allegedly breaking hijab rules and died in the custody of the country's morality police. Her death sparked nationwide protests.

"It's inspirational that some people are willing [to protest], knowing when they take off their scarf, what's going to happen to them," she says. She viewed the protests as a generational conflict: "There's a lot of women taking a lot of risk to do that, but also men from their own generation supporting them and also getting into trouble… the older generation are trying to keep things how they are, and the younger generation are ready [for] change."

We haven't heard Within Temptation this fired up in ages, but their initial intention wasn't to make an album. They had spent the last two years releasing singles – *Entertain You* and *The Purge* in 2020 and *Shed My Skin* in 2021, all of which appear on the record – and enjoying the off-cycle immediacy of being able to write, record and upload. Following the outbreak of war, though, writing between their home and the Swedish studio of long-time collaborator Daniel Gibson, the remaining material came together over six months.

"I CAN TALK ABOUT BUBBLEGUM, BUT ALSO THINGS THAT MATTER"

SHARON DEN ADEL

Other topics are discussed on the record, too: *Ritual* is a tongue-in-cheek, double-entendre-heavy paean to female sexual expression. *Shed My Skin* is about living by your own rules, free from the judgement of others, while Sharon describes *Entertain You* as "a song for the misfits". It was inspired, she says, by a video she saw on social media.

"There was a trans woman who was walking in England, and she was bullied by three young guys. She's not there for their entertainment, but they're using her for entertainment because she's different. I wrote that song [to say] we're beautiful in our own way. To share some love."

While some of the tracks were written and recorded almost three years apart, what holds the album together is the theme of freedom.

"To protect your freedom, you have to be active," says Robert. "If you're passive, then you're going to lose it. It's

TEMPTING FATE

The songs that chart Within Temptation's evolution from symphonic pioneers to arena-filling stars

MOTHER EARTH
(MOTHER EARTH, 2000)
Evoking a fairy tale world of crystal lakes and enchanted forests, *Mother Earth* embraced symphonic metal, albeit with a folkier, less bombastic edge. This is Within Temptation at their purest and prettiest.

STAND MY GROUND
(THE SILENT FORCE, 2004)
On *Stand My Ground*, the band perfected a blend of anthemia and dark-edged splendour that has defined their music ever since. Almost two decades on, it is still one of their most enduring anthems.

WHAT HAVE YOU DONE
(THE HEART OF EVERYTHING, 2007)
Turning every dial in Within Temptation's arsenal up to 100, with melodramatic vocals, hulking guitars and an absolute belter of a chorus, this is the band at their most electrifyingly overblown.

OUR SOLEMN HOUR
(THE HEART OF EVERYTHING, 2007)
A Winston Churchill speech, a choir singing in Latin and a sense of imminent apocalypse – 16 years after its release, *Our Solemn Hour* still sounds as urgent and relevant as ever.

FASTER
(THE UNFORGIVING, 2011)
Boasting one of their most irresistible choruses, *Faster* dialled down the band's symphonic inclinations for razor-sharp pop metal. The first step in the band's transition from symphonic royalty to arena mainstays.

PARADISE
(WHAT ABOUT US?)
(HYDRA, 2014)
However incohesive *Hydra* was as an album, it gifted us this thunderous, unforgettable duet with ex-Nightwish singer Tarja Turunen, and for that, we are eternally grateful.

THE RECKONING
(RESIST, 2019)
With a little help from Papa Roach's Jacoby Shaddix and a buzzing electronic backbone that added a whole new dimension to the band's sound, with *The Reckoning*, they entered a gigantic new era.

SUPERNOVA
(RESIST, 2019)
Written following the death of Sharon's father in 2018, *Supernova* is a powerhouse of a track. As she sings, '*These days when I'm lost, I search the skies*' over glittering synths and colossal guitars, it perfectly captures the enormity of grief.

THE PURGE
(BLEED OUT, 2023)
Face it: no one makes fists-in-the-air anthems better than Within Temptation. *The Purge*, a cathartic command to eradicate any toxic presences in your life, simply begs to be screamed at the top of your lungs.

WIRELESS
(BLEED OUT, 2023)
Not only is *Wireless* the band's heaviest and most overtly political song yet, it brings every one of their sonic eras together as a perfect culmination of past and present.

Within Temptation (left to right): Jeroen van Veen, Stefan Helleblad, Sharon den Adel, Mike Coolen, Ruud Jolie, Martijn Spierenburg

Live venues are only going to get bigger for Within Temptation

about personal freedom, but also freedom for your country, for your friends, family… everything."

"It's a record about the unbreakable desire of humans to live free from tyranny and oppression," agrees Sharon. "How many also are willing to give so much to achieve this not only for themselves, but for others and future generations. As an artist you have this platform, and we can talk about bubblegum. But I can also talk about things that matter."

Having listened to the album in full, we decamp to a nearby brasserie for lunch, and to continue the conversation. Sharon drives, and as we cruise through the cool shade of the forest next to their home, she motions towards a large sand dune that meets the trees – a bizarre natural phenomenon where the cover art for her 2018 solo album, *My Indigo*, was shot. She'd like to record more solo work, she later tells us.

"One day, but not at the moment, because I need a little time. It's been a rollercoaster. I have been writing songs since the war started, before that we had the pandemic, and after that we had to do all the shows that we couldn't do during Corona."

"TO PROTECT YOUR FREEDOM, YOU HAVE TO BE ACTIVE"

ROBERT WESTERHOLT

Once at the restaurant, we are shown to a table in a private corner outside, tucked away beside the hedges, where Robert and Sharon order us food and drinks. Clearly well-known, several members of staff come over to greet them during the rest of our interview. Our conversation takes us all over: to Taylor Swift, an artist Sharon respects, and whether they would ever do Eurovision given the rise in metal acts (the answer is no, although Sharon was once on the Dutch judging panel). We soon get back to the album – whenever an artist wades into the kind of matters discussed on *Bleed Out*, someone always complains that politics should be kept out of music. Have they received any backlash?

"I deleted a message yesterday on Facebook," says Sharon, explaining that a fan/troll had taken umbrage with the band's song *Raise Your Banner*, from 2019's *Resist*, which Sharon has taken to dedicating to Ukraine at their live shows, often waving a flag onstage.

"He said, 'You're preaching about freedom and then you preach war. You slut.'"

She pauses to let the language sink in. He had complained about the lyric, *'Blood for freedom.'*

"It means you would give your life to have freedom," she argues. "So, if he had put five minutes of effort into ▶

KATJA OGRIN

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reading the lyrics, then he would know *Raise Your Banner* is taking a stand."

"What annoys me a lot is that people say, 'Don't talk about politics'," adds Robert. "It's not even politics. It's your opinion as an artist. Artists have opinions. That's what art is for. That's what makes it interesting."

In 2021, Sharon was invited by *Kerrang!* to write a comment piece for International Women's Day, and chose to argue the importance of access to abortion. Her research for the piece revealed vastly differing approaches across Europe.

"There were people who didn't understand my point of view," she says of the response to the essay, as lunch arrives at the table. "Not everybody is in the same place at the same time when you write an article like that. But backlash is also a good thing, because then it gets the attention that it needs."

The track *Don't Pray For Me* from the new album makes the argument for bodily autonomy: *'I don't need your absolution, so don't hold that sword over me / For my confessions I don't need a church / I don't need salt to know where it hurts.'*

"We were fighting for that and talking about it [when I was in my teens], and we're still fighting the same battles," she says, explaining that the issues facing women are increasingly at the forefront of her mind, especially given her own daughter's coming of age. "It doesn't seem like we have stepped forward yet."

We ask about the rise in AI-created music online, and if they worry about the artistic implications. Robert is dismissive.

"Music is not just about listening to something, it's the whole story around it, where you are at a certain place," he says. "We're very interested in what it can do. It's one big experiment."

How would you feel if someone used AI to make a Within Temptation song, and people thought it was an official track?

"What I could find difficult is they could make lyrics, that are offensive, that I didn't write, and people might think I did," says Sharon.

Robert shrugs. "But then you can tell them you didn't."

"But if they can't tell the difference…" Sharon perseveres.

Robert is still unconcerned. "If it's not on your official website… it's really no issue at all."

Sharon looks at us with a wry smile. "So even we have our discussions about that."

When Within Temptation were able to resume touring after the pandemic, they brought The Aftermath to life. Rescheduling their long-postponed Worlds Collide UK arena tour with Evanescence, suddenly they were operating, conceptually and visually, on a whole new level. Their pyro-packed stage production even included a huge humanoid head. They cite Iron Maiden, who they have toured with several times over the years – the most recent outing being on 2022's Legacy Of The Beast run – as their main inspiration.

"Those bands who do something special visually have always inspired us to do the same," says Sharon.

And while they've been a bone fide arena band in mainland Europe for years, it felt like, finally, they'd cemented the same status in the UK.

"I think everywhere the venues will now be a bit bigger," smiles Robert. "We felt it was a milestone in our career. We didn't care too much about what we were making [financially] with the show, but just to make it the most memorable show that we could. We never thought that we would reach this far."

Sonically, too, it feels like Within Temptation could go anywhere. While *Bleed Out* is littered with symphonic elements, it's a musical label that now feels uncomfortable, something they've long outgrown.

"We don't feel like a symphonic band," says Robert.

Sharon agrees. "But I don't know what to call ourselves now either. I don't have a new box to put ourselves in."

And even as they're making the final changes to *Bleed Out*, their minds are fixed on the future. As hectic as the last year has been, the process of making the new album has got their creative juices flowing.

"It's so funny. As soon as we finished [*Bleed Out*] we were like, 'We want to make another album.' But we're going to take our time for the next one," she insists. "We were working full force from our house [during the pandemic]. I loved what I was doing, but at the same time I was also very tired. So I can't wait to have a little bit of a break. This summer, we have a few festivals and then I have some time to really get both feet on the ground."

She won't take her foot off the gas for too long, though. After 27 years of constant innovation, Within Temptation don't know how to stand still.

"What I feel like now is actually writing again," she laughs, shaking her head. "It's very strange and positive!"

"WE DON'T FEEL LIKE A SYMPHONIC BAND"

ROBERT WESTERHOLT

Within Temptation have always been equally fascinated and horrified by the human predisposition for destruction and harm, whether it be towards our planet or fellow man. As far back as 2004's *The Silent Force*, the haunting *Forsaken* painted a desperate picture of the end of days. *'Our time has run out, our future has died / There's no more escape… We're the last of our kind.'* They also grappled with the futility of war in 2007, on *Our Solemn Hour*, from *The Heart Of Everything*, which interspersed symphonic excess with excerpts from Winston Churchill's Be Ye Men Of Valour speech.

In 2020, they had started planning a stage production worthy of their grandiose vision, although the pandemic put their plans on ice. Instead, their blueprints became The Aftermath, a CGI livestream in 2021 which took place in a post-apocalyptic world. It depicted the band performing in the remnants of a ruined landscape, escaping to space as the planet burns in a fireball below – a sobering statement on the man-made challenges facing us today.

"It was a thought experiment of what would be very possible in the future," says Robert of his sci-fi vision. "There were two thoughts behind it. One, we are getting more aware that we're really destroying our planet and ourselves. That's pretty obvious right now. But the second thing is the big perspective – it's quite logical that people, at a certain point, will definitely [abandon Earth and] go into space."

Another subject the band are interested in is the increasing, perhaps dangerous, control modern technology has on our lives. They're huge fans of Charlie Brooker's Netflix series *Black Mirror*, while a similar narrative rippled through 2019's *Resist*. Their live shows have become increasingly futuristic in theme, while the video for recent single *Wireless* was made using AI. We mention that *Black Mirror* actor Aaron Paul voiced concerns about AI, and that soon we might not be able to tell what's real and what's not.

"I think that's already the case," says Sharon.

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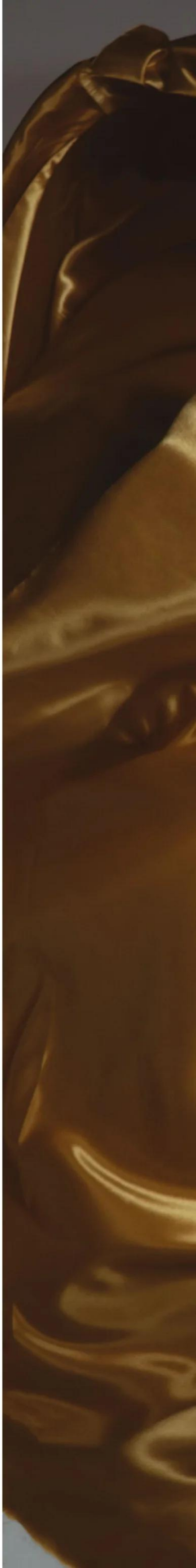
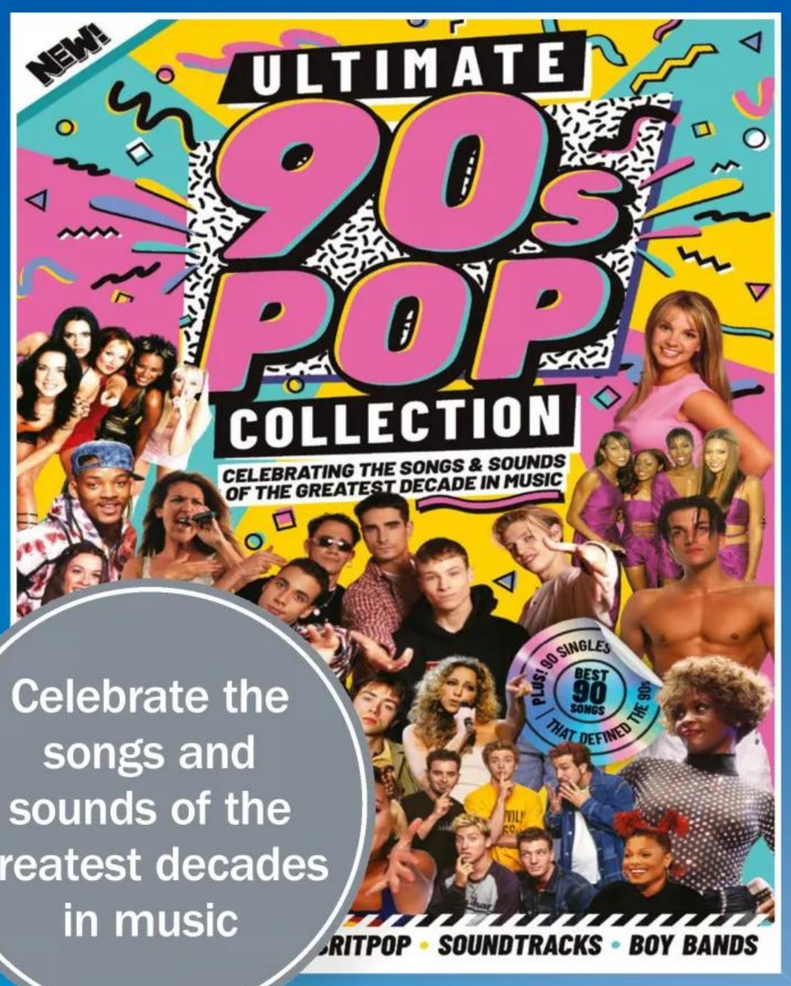


Maybe not symphonic metal anymore, but still definitely metal, and that's the important thing



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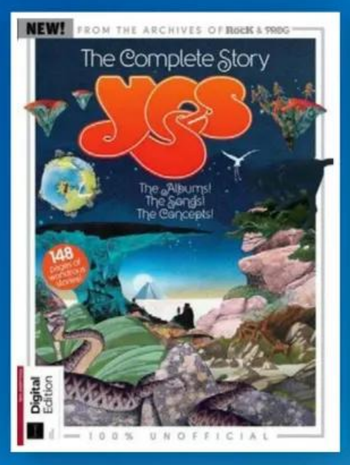

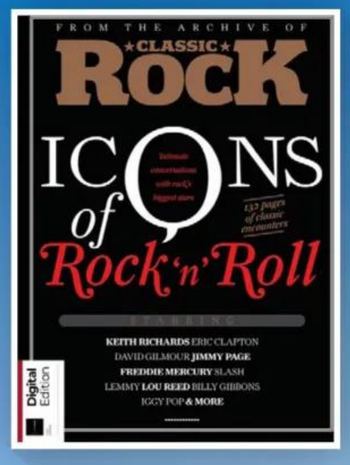

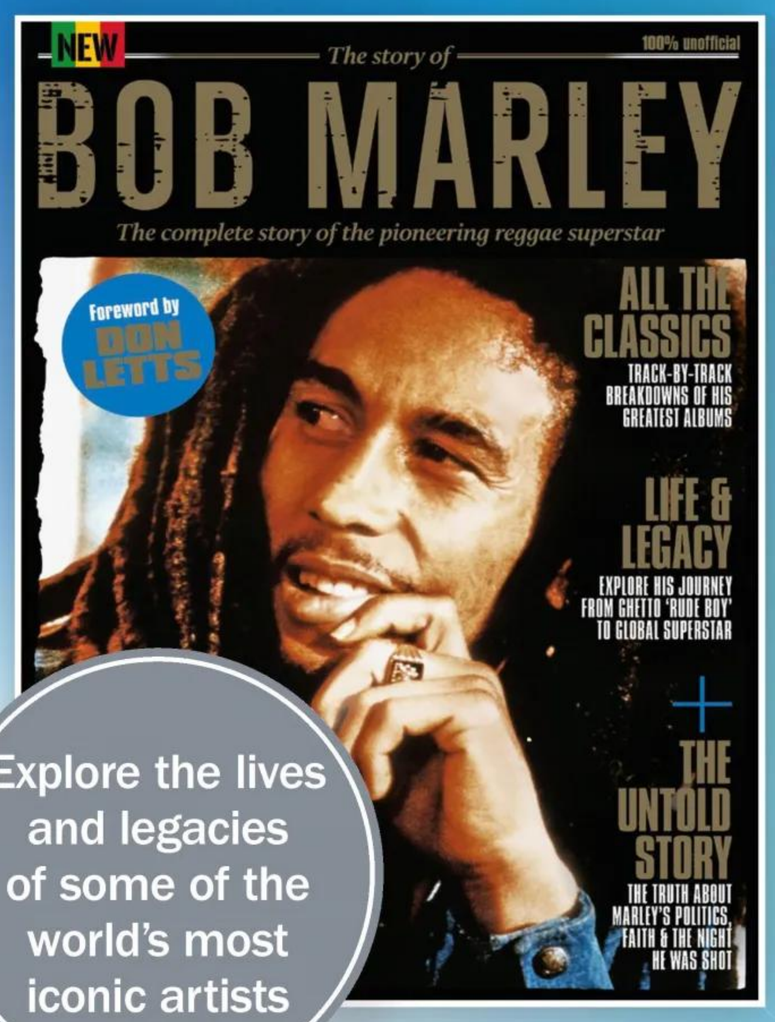

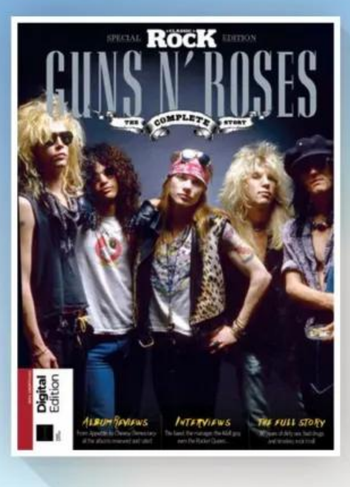

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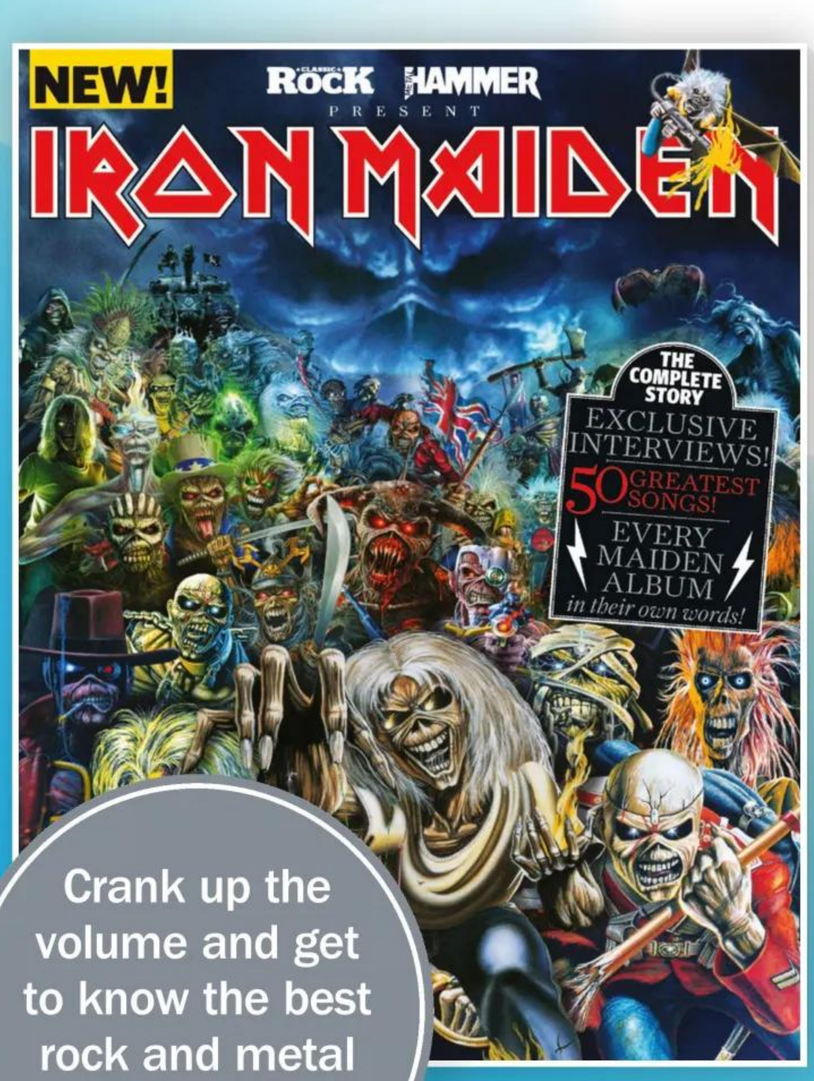

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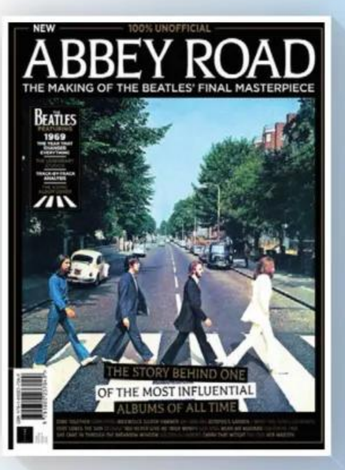

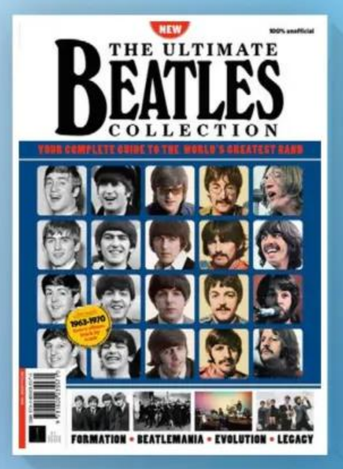

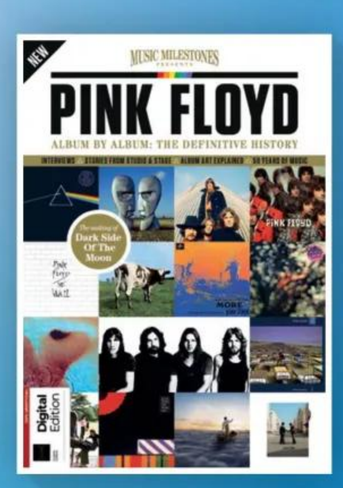

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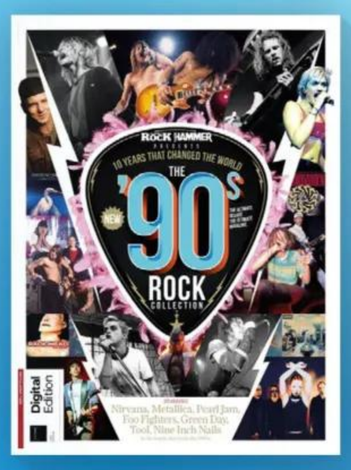

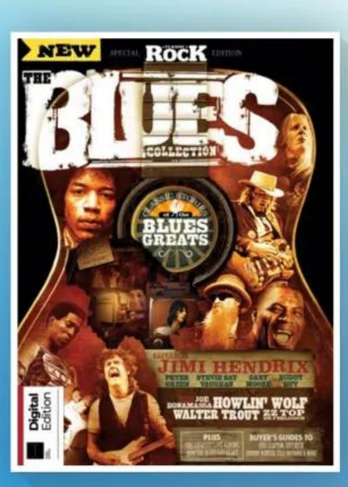

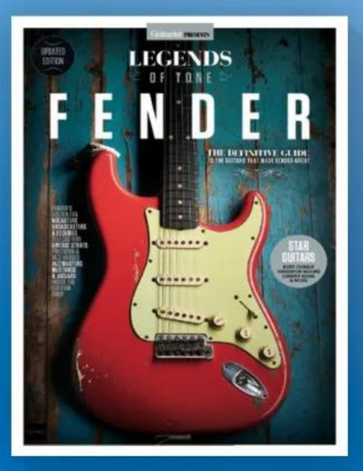

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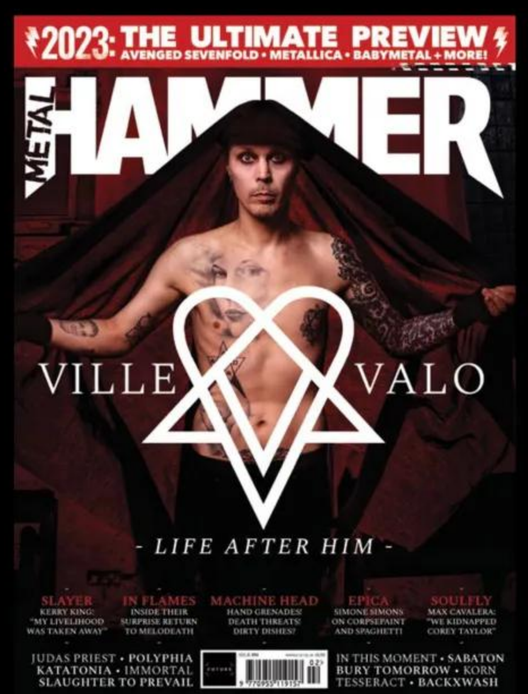

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